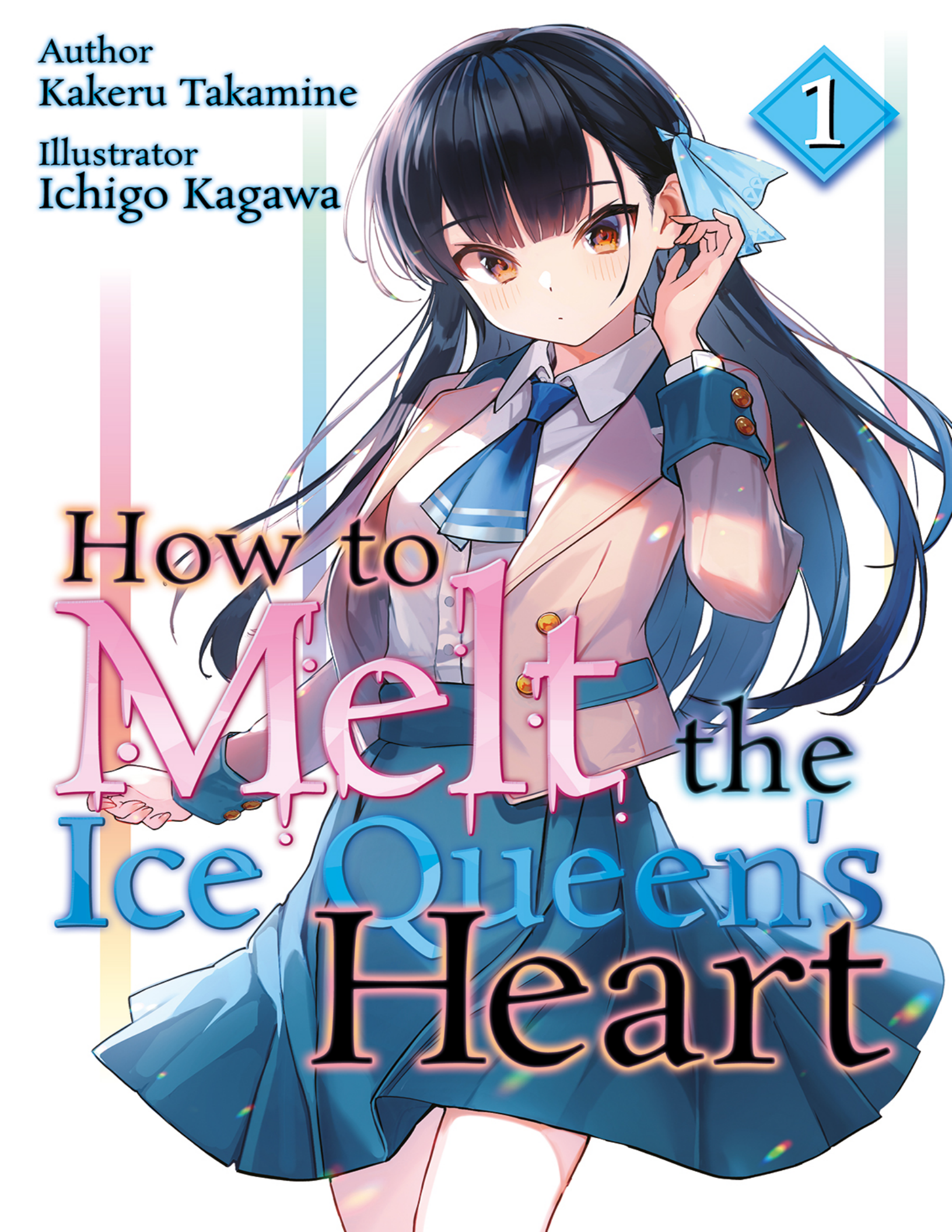
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How to Melt the Ice Queen's Heart

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How to Melt the Ice Queen's Heart


Chiaki Kikkawa
Asahi's best friend, and
Hinami's "obnoxious" boyfriend
Asahi Kagami
Likes to help those in need, although sometimes
at the expense of taking things too far
Hinami Aiba
Chiaki's "obnoxious"
girlfriend
Fuyuka Himuro
"The Ice Queen" herself


“I’ve... taken a liking to
your cooking, after all.”


?
“So tell me, Asahi—who gave you that brooch?”
“Uh, well...”
Toko Kagami
Asahi’s Mother


“You’d better not forget
your promise.”

Contents

Prologue

Chapter One: The Ice Queen Caught a Cold

Chapter Two: A Once-in-a-Lifetime Smile

Chapter Three: Growing Further Apart

Chapter Four: Breaking the Ice

Chapter Five: A Forced Draw

Chapter Six: What Lies Beneath the Ice

Chapter Seven: Lunch Box

Chapter Eight: The Sports Festival

Chapter Nine: A Pretty Serious Suggestion

Chapter Ten: Growing Closer, Yet Still Worlds Apart

Chapter Eleven: A Visit From the Obnoxious Couple

Chapter Twelve: Proof of Friendship

Chapter Thirteen: A Sweet Promise

Chapter Fourteen: Christmas Eve

Chapter Fifteen: Christmas

After Story: Playing in the Snow with The Ice Queen

Glossary

Afterword

Prologue

Asahi Kagami, a first-year in high school, had only been attending for six months when rumors began to circulate about one of his classmates: Fuyuka Himuro, a girl as frigid as ice.

Autumn had just begun, which marked the onset of exam season. Asahi and one of his friends—Chiaki Kikkawa—were sitting in their abandoned classroom after school. With their exams less than a week away, they got together for the purpose of studying. Chiaki didn't seem to be in the mood to cram for the upcoming tests, however, as he broke the silence by mentioning something that had been the talk of the school for some time now.

"Hey, remember what happened last Friday?"

"You'll have to be more specific."

"Dude, I'm talking about how Himuro left school early. Apparently, it was because she had a fever."

"That's news to me."

"So she supposedly caught a cold, yeah? But get this: she returned today like nothing had happened to her."

"Okay, can you shut up now? I'm trying to study here."

"I mean, how ironic is it that someone with a nickname like 'The Ice Queen' ended up catching a cold? Sounds like something out of a comedy sketch or something," Chiaki, paying no heed to Asahi's complaints, added with a stretch.

"If this is just going to turn into a gossip session, I can go home and study by myself."

"Hey! Come on, man. It was just a short break, alright?"

Asahi was one of the best in his class when it came to studies. Chiaki, on the other hand, was, let's say, not on the same level. Asahi had accepted his friend's request to assist him with his studies, but they hadn't made much progress as of yet. When he attempted to concentrate again on what he had been helping Chiaki with, he couldn't help but be distracted by what his friend had just brought up. His pen stopped, he let out a sigh, and he thought to himself, "*The Ice Queen, huh...?*"

That happened to be the nickname of one of Asahi's classmates, Fuyuka Himuro. At some point, a few people at school had begun to refer to her as such, and it had been quick to catch on. Now, pretty much everyone knew

her by that moniker alone. Deep down, he thought that her nickname likely had nothing to do with who she really was. After all, to him, she just seemed like an ordinary girl.

Despite her normality, she still managed to stand out in other ways. She was beautiful, aloof, and incredibly intelligent. She always received the highest test scores, possessed some serious skill when it came to basketball, harbored a love for romance novels—which she read in the cafeteria during lunch breaks—and came from a wealthy family. Asahi knew that much about her, at least. It was difficult not to, since she was the constant talk of the school. And that was just the tip of the iceberg.

Her accomplishments, as well as her academic and personal life, had created a foundation for her, a veritable pedestal to be placed upon. She quickly rose in popularity among everyone at school, regardless of their gender, year, or class number. They wanted to get to know her better and become her friend.

Unfortunately, none of them had succeeded. As soon as the term started, one of the first things she had made clear to her classmates was to stay away from her.

From then onward, she was always alone, keeping everyone at arm's length with her icy demeanor. She was a cold, stern girl, with a tone that never faltered, and an expression that never wavered. She wasn't one for small talk, kept conversations as brief as she felt necessary, and always maintained her distance. Eventually, this resulted in her nickname, and she'd been dubbed "The Ice Queen" ever since.

Asahi felt that it described her fairly accurately, but something about the whole situation just didn't sit right with him. There had to be something else to her, something more.

"Oh yeah—she's your neighbor, isn't she? I remember seeing her place the last time I came over to hang out."

"Study."

"Sir, yes Sir!"

After telling his friend off, Asahi returned to his own studies. He opened his practice book, replete with questions from previous exams, and set to work on a set of equations with his favorite pen. A few problems later, it was clear that his mind wasn't where it needed to be; he couldn't concentrate in the slightest. After he wrote out and quickly erased several

equations, he realized that it was time for him to return home. Studying that day had been completely futile.

He parted ways with Chiaki at the train station as usual and made his way back to his residence. Thoughts that had been tormenting him since last Friday swirled around in his head.

"*Geez, I'm acting like a typical, stupid, love-struck teenager,*" he repeated endlessly to himself.

It wasn't love or anything like that, but ever since last Friday, the only thing that had been on his mind was Fuyuka Himuro. That was when—out of the blue—that withdrawn girl, who everyone referred to as "The Ice Queen," had left school early with a very high temperature.

Chapter One

The Ice Queen Caught a Cold

It was Friday afternoon, and school had just been let out for the day. This was often the time that students tended to get together to chat, but on this particular day, they appeared to be more excitable than usual.

The subjects of their conversations were nothing out of the ordinary—they chatted idly about how tedious cramming for tests had been, upcoming plans they had for the weekend, and so on. Others, however, were more fixated on a certain girl who had left school early because of a fever. Asahi was one such student.

After passing the time conversing with some friends of his, he decided to go home early. He took the direct train home. As the ride normally took around 20 minutes, he contemplated what he would be having for that night's dinner. When the train arrived at his station, he made a brief detour at the nearby supermarket before heading for his apartment complex.

Upon opening the door to his complex, he was accompanied by a strong gust of wind. A solitary figure in the long hallway leading to the apartment caught his eye—a figure that, judging by the uniform she was donning, attended the same school he did. Asahi wasn't acquainted with her by any means, but he was well aware of who she was. She was Fuyuka Himuro—also known as "The Ice Queen"—and the focal point of several rumors at school.

She, along with her family, happened to move into this apartment complex when Asahi had just become a freshman in high school. Although they were next-door neighbors, and had several chance encounters before, they had never so much as spoken to each other.

Asahi had been planning to pass by her and enter his room without exchanging a single word, as was par for the course, but...

"You okay?" he found himself asking her. Asahi didn't expect an answer, but he'd blurted it out nevertheless. As soon as he did, he was reminded of their first meeting after she had just moved in.

He'd pushed the button on the intercom, hoping she would open the door so he could greet her. Instead, he was met with a cold, monotonous voice from the other side of the door.

“Please go away. I’d prefer to avoid any interaction with my neighbors. Thank you for understanding.”

Ever since then, Asahi knew that she wouldn’t be the easiest person to interact with. He smiled unconsciously and thought to himself, *Someone’s a little distant, huh?*

Once he’d caught wind of the rumors circulating at school, he quickly understood that he hadn’t done anything wrong—she treated everyone like this. Apparently, she consistently kept everyone at arm’s length and had no friends to speak of. When he’d finally understood how she acted toward everyone in general, he’d made up his mind that it would be best to leave her be.

Even though they were neighbors, they’d never gotten the chance to talk to each other or form any sort of relationship. They were essentially strangers.

That day, however, the situation was quite different than usual. Her skin, which was usually a dainty snow-white, was flushed red. Her breathing was ragged, and her gait was uneven. Something wasn’t right, and it was clear as day that she wasn’t feeling her best.

He was aware he was sticking his nose where it didn’t belong, but something had compelled him to ask. Even after she’d ignored his first question, he decided to double down and speak up again.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“I am. Don’t mind me,” she answered with her usual tandem of terseness and trademark ice-cold expression. Her stare—or glare, really—pierced him like icicles against bare skin. It was not the friendliest of looks.

Jeez. No wonder everyone calls her “The Ice Queen,” he thought to himself. He had to remind himself that this was just how she was. Attempting to close the distance with her would only make her push him away harder. She’d created a barrier between herself and the rest of the world.

Asahi supposed that there must be a specific reason Fuyuka Himuro acted this way. Something must’ve happened in her past that caused her to grow as frigid as she was now.

On the other hand, he acknowledged that he was selfishly butting in without her approval, so he decided the best course of action would be to listen to her request. She was obviously under the weather, but if she didn’t want any help, there was no need for him to push the matter.

Actually, she left school early today because of a fever, didn't she? he thought to himself as he headed toward his apartment.

She was heading out in her uniform as he'd crossed paths with her. Perhaps she was on the way to pick up some medicine? Regardless, he thought it a bit weird for her to go out with those clothes on. Maybe she hadn't had the will or the strength to change into a different outfit. It would probably be for the best if she'd stayed at home, but what could he do about it?

As his thoughts darted between concern for her well-being and anticipation for his dinner, Asahi opened the door to his apartment. When he went to close the door behind him, though, he saw Fuyuka leaning against the wall, evidently on the brink of collapsing.

"Hey! Are you okay?! Keep it together!" he shouted as he rushed over to help.

She didn't respond. It wasn't out of the ordinary for him to receive the silent treatment from her, but this wasn't exactly an ordinary situation. Perhaps she wasn't able to respond as a result of her ailment. Even standing seemed to be a struggle for her. Her eyes were shut tight, and she was radiating enough heat off her body that he could feel it just by being in her vicinity.

As Asahi extended his hand to try and support her weak frame, the words she'd said on her first day in class reverberated in his mind once more:

"Stay away from me, if you don't mind."

It was as if she had cloistered herself from the rest of the world. She hid within the depths of an impenetrable blizzard, casting aside any and all human interaction.

"Can you hear me? Answer me if you can!"

"I can hear you. Too loudly, in fact," she replied to Asahi's shouting. She was still conscious, but it was clear she was having difficulty breathing. Her brief reply alone seemed like a gargantuan task for her in Asahi's eyes. Despite her illness, she wasn't showing any signs of vulnerability, nor did she allow him to come any closer.

"I'll be fine on my own..." she continued. This time, her voice had regained some composure, and her brusque dismissal was a clear hint that she didn't wish to continue talking to him.

She waved his hand away, refusing his help, and managed to stand up on her own after some unsteadiness. Her gaze was now vacant, and Asahi saw how she was stumbling, barely able to walk on her own.

I get it, she doesn't want to have anything to do with anyone. Message received, loud and clear. But does she really need to take it this far? Asahi pondered to himself.

He wasn't alone with his thoughts for long, though, before Himuro collapsed for the second time. Right as she was about to hit the floor, he managed to swoop in and catch her.

Okay. Maybe I'm going against her wishes, and maybe she sees me as a nuisance right now, but I can't possibly leave her alone like this, he determined.

"Look at you. Nothing about you is 'fine,'" he chided. He could tell that all her strength had been sapped, and she was at her limit. Fuyuka opened her eyes and looked off in the distance with an empty stare. After a few seconds, she closed her eyes once again. She offered up no resistance this time.

"Himuro...? Wait a second, did she fall asleep?" he asked no one in particular. His only reply was her ragged breathing—she was so exhausted that she'd collapsed right on the spot. The girl in front of him was no longer "The Ice Queen," but a frail girl who'd been bested by her fever.

Her parents must still be out, he concluded. He gently laid her body down on the floor, using his backpack as a makeshift pillow. There was no chance her parents—or, hell, even her grandparents—would've allowed her to go out alone like that. Asahi tried ringing the doorbell to her residence a few times, but didn't receive an answer.

What should he do in this situation? There were no adults around to help him. Maybe he could wake her up and bring her to his apartment to get some rest? No, that wouldn't be a wise idea—rousing her from her sleep in itself would be bad news, but she'd most likely refuse his proposition on the spot. What if he searched for her key and took her back to her place? No, that wasn't any better. The very thought of rummaging through her belongings to try and find her house key was already off-putting enough. Accompanied by the fact that, despite the weight of the situation, barging into another person's house without their permission was off-limits, the idea was a bust. Those were two plans that were immediately scrapped.

“Guess there’s no other choice,” he muttered in a reluctant tone. He grabbed his key, unlocked the door to his place, and propped it open.

“Please don’t think I’m a creep because of this,” he said as he lifted her up. Of course, he wasn’t expecting a response, but he wanted to say it just in case.

Being in such close proximity to her caused him to notice the soft, warm sensation of her body for the first time. This was paired with a sweet waft of perfume. But this wasn’t the time for that—she was ill and in desperate need of help. He awkwardly hoisted her up in a clumsy attempt at the bridal carry he’d seen in movies and entered his apartment.

*

Asahi headed to the nearest convenience store, where he purchased a couple of cooling packs and a sports drink to tend to his new, bedridden guest. When he returned to his place, he was treated to a rare sight he’d never witnessed before.

“I can’t eat... but... *snore*...”

Himuro was out like a light. Her normally-graceful features were somewhat marred by a line of drool flowing from her lips. It perfectly encapsulated how drained she was, though—she was completely unguarded in her sleeping state.

What kind of dream is she having that’s making her sleep talk like that? Asaki wondered. He stared at her slumbering figure and continued, *Damn. I gotta say, though, she really is beautiful.*

Her black, silky hair made for a stark contrast to her porcelain skin. She had long, delicate eyelashes, a dainty nose, and cherry-pink lips. She possessed all the features to easily land her in the modeling industry, if she so desired.

She might be known as “The Ice Queen” at school, but I do kinda get why she’s so popular. I can’t imagine her as the type of girl that normal people would consider “girlfriend material,” though. Then again, the fact that she’s so distant is part of her charm... in some weird way.

Regardless of his thoughts, the fact of the matter was that she was sleeping like a baby. And, judging by the joyous look on her face, she wasn’t going to be waking up any time soon.

“Hrm... I always have room for dessert... *Snore*...”

It was a pretty ludicrous scenario—here was the fabled Ice Queen, happily dreaming away about eating sweets. Asahi could barely believe it. Even though she barely uttered a word to anybody at school, she was mumbling, unguarded, in her sleep. He would’ve never believed it if he hadn’t seen it for himself.

Her perfume wafted around the room, and eventually, it became permeated with its sweet scent, distracting him from his musings.

“So this is ‘The Ice Queen,’ huh?” he whispered. A previous conversation suddenly crossed his mind—his friend Chiaki had once told him, “If only she wasn’t a literal icicle, man. Every guy in the school would be head over heels for her.”

At the time, Asahi hadn’t really understood what he’d meant by that. But now that he’d been able to get a closer look at her, he now saw what his friend had been trying to convey. Her features were mature and almost regal, in a sense. She was so gorgeous that even her sleeping, drooling face made Asahi’s heart skip a beat. Indeed, if she were to take Chiaki’s suggestion to heart, she would most certainly amass a large group of fans.

“Anyway, I should get to making dinner.”

He was glad to have seen this side of her, but he knew he shouldn’t spend too much time gawking. That would be discourteous of him, after all. It was best to leave her to get some shut-eye and start preparing dinner.

As he left the room, the girl softly whispered, “Mommy...” However, it did not reach Asahi’s ears.

*

Three hours had passed since Asahi had brought Fuyuka to his house. He was studying for the upcoming tests in his room when he suddenly heard noises coming from the neighboring room. He decided to head over there to check it out. Based on the noises he was hearing, he assumed she had woken up.

“May I come in?” he asked while knocking on the door.

He was met with no response. The noises continued, so he interpreted that as a “yes” and opened the door. Fuyuka was sitting on the side of the bed and was glaring at him with intense hostility. Asahi had expected as

much—she'd just woken up in an unfamiliar location, and the first thing she saw was a guy she didn't care for. It went without saying that she wouldn't be in the best of moods. She seemed to be calmer than Asahi had expected, though. Although she normally repelled people with her indifferent attitude, she wasn't giving off the same unapproachable aura now.

"Didn't I tell you that I'd be fine on my own?" she muttered with her typical coldness. There was a slight change in the tone of her voice, though—she wasn't trying to push him away as she had been before. Although she knew the answer to her question, she'd opted to ask it anyway. Asahi understood her intentions and decided to give her a piece of his mind.

"Would it have been better if I left you, passed out, in the middle of the hallway? Would you have preferred that?"

She didn't reply to his quip. Asahi realized that she likely understood the situation she was in, hence why she hadn't freaked out when she'd woken up earlier. Maybe the cooling pack on her forehead was helping her remain calm, as well; she likely had a dreadful fever.

After a brief moment of silence, she decided to say something in return.

"Well, you helped me out. I should thank you for that."

Asahi's eyes widened. He definitely hadn't foreseen her to show even the slightest sliver of gratitude, much less in such a direct way.

"Um... You're welcome," he answered awkwardly a few seconds later. His mind was still hazy from the weird state of affairs he'd found himself in. It was unusual to see her being so "nice," considering the only thing he knew about her was her reputation as one of the least friendly girls in the entire school.

Fuyuka stopped staring daggers at Asahi and turned her attention to the room instead. She was most likely too tired to maintain such a high level of wariness. Seeing her acting so out of character was certainly disconcerting.

"Just stay in bed a little longer. I'll bring you something to eat," Asahi said. With that, he made a quick getaway to the kitchen, not even sticking around for a response.

He opened the fridge and retrieved the sports drink and jelly he'd bought earlier that day. The door behind him creaked open, and he spotted Fuyuka attempting to leave the room. She was still staggering and looked as though she was about to pass out at any moment.

"When will you realize you're still not well enough to be walking? Can't you do what I asked?"

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. You’re walking like you’ve got both shoes on the wrong feet. Just go lie down.”

“I can’t accept any more of your hospitality. If you’ll excuse m—Eek!”

A short cry rang out, followed by a muffled sound, and then silence. She had fallen against him. The sensation of her warm, soft skin against his made his heart race. He also noticed, now that she was closer, the reason behind her fever.

“Wait, you’re injured,” he observed. He tried to remain as composed as possible, but he couldn’t prevent his heart from attempting to burst out of his chest.

He stopped to consider what he’d just done—as she was about to collapse to the floor, he instinctively dropped what he was holding to quickly grab her. Now they were essentially hugging, and she was so close that he was having trouble keeping his cool. He’d held her a few hours ago when he’d carried her into his apartment, but this was a completely different sensation. She was conscious now and was reacting against him.

“Please get away from me.”

“Oh, er, sorry about that.”

He wouldn’t have minded if the moment had lasted a little bit longer, but he quickly apologized and backed away. Her complexion was now a bright red, and her body was trembling slightly.

Never would’ve imagined she could be like this too, he thought to himself.

He couldn’t take his eyes off of her—she always seemed so serious at school. The contrast between her stoic side and her flustered one was a unique experience that he got great enjoyment from seeing.

The silence was broken not by Fuyuka speaking up, but rather by a very specific sound she made.

Rumble...

“So... I’m going to guess you’re hungry?”

It hadn’t been Asahi’s intention to hurt Fuyuka’s feelings, but he most certainly had. Her face deepened in color, tears welled up in her eyes, and she stared directly at him. In that moment, she was no longer The Ice Queen—she was simply a cute, normal girl.

*

Fuyuka tried to forcibly leave Asahi's house, but after another close brush with the floor, combined with the protests of her stomach, she ended up returning to the room as she'd been told earlier. Asahi assumed that she had finally realized her limits by herself; it was certainly not because she made the choice to finally listen to him.

It was pretty obvious that she was not feeling well, so it was shocking to see her try to move in the first place.

"Can I turn around now?"

"Yes, you may."

He turned around after he heard both her confirmation and the beeping of the electronic thermometer that he'd handed to her. It read 38 degrees—not serious enough to rush her to the hospital, but bad enough to be considered a fever. She'd need more than just willpower alone if she wanted to move on her own as long as this lasted.

"It says 38 degrees right here, and you say you're fine? As if."

She looked away, unable to retort. She was quite frail, and it showed.

He sighed and, to break the awkward silence, said, "Well, you're hungry, aren't you? I can whip up some gruel in 10 minutes if you want."

"You are going to cook it?" she asked, eyes wide in astonishment.

"You see anyone else here? What, you don't trust my cooking skills just 'cus I'm a guy or something?"

"That's not what I was implying at all, but..."

She definitely wanted to say something, but the fact of the matter was that she was hungry. Asahi decided to cut her off before she could add anything to her awkward trail-off.

"Then just stay there and relax. I'll make some for you."

Maybe not the best way to say it, but I've always been blunt with everyone, he thought to himself.

Fuyuka seemed to be pretty blunt herself, regardless. It was a good thing, in his opinion—she wouldn't misinterpret him this way. Understanding each other without wasting time skirting around hollow exchanges was something they could both appreciate, and that was all he needed to know. She needed his help, and he wanted to provide it. That's all there was to it.

Maybe other people would view them as incompatible because of that similarity. Contrary to expectations, however, that wasn't the case at all.

"I'll leave it to you, then," she mumbled as Asahi was exiting the room.

He headed toward the kitchen without another word.

*

"Hey, I'm coming in."

After knocking to announce his arrival, Asahi opened the door. Fuyuka was still in bed, but now was sitting upright. Still, it seemed as if even that was an endeavor for her—her cheeks and forehead were reddened by the fever.

Good thing I called out to her before she went out. Otherwise, she would've been in way worse shape compared to now, he mused.

"Here's the gruel I promised. I don't know if you have any allergies, or if you like it made a specific way, so..." Asahi trailed off. He'd mainly used eggs, rice, and not much else. It wasn't very complex purposefully to avoid triggering any sort of allergies she might've had. She didn't respond.

She looked skeptically at the food for a moment. After she ascertained what it was, she nodded and extended her hands in a motion to accept it.

"It's pretty hot, so be careful."

He'd made sure to cool the food somewhat after he'd cooked it, but the white and yellow bowl containing the food still had steam rising from it, so he decided to warn her before any accidents could arise. He handed her a spoon, and once she took it, she surveyed the food with more detail.

"What's wrong? There's nothing weird in it, if that's what you're thinking."

"I know that much."

"Then eat. It'll be good for you. Focus on getting better," he admonished, trying to imitate what his grandfather would tell him long ago whenever he fell ill.

She took a few seconds to process what he'd said. After a moment of hesitation, she finally clasped her hands together, ready to eat.

"Thank you for the food," she said, then spooned some gruel up to her mouth.

Asahi watched her as she ate. He didn't think that he screwed the dish up—the process was fairly easy, and he had faith in his cooking skills thanks to his parents being chefs. His friends had liked the things he'd cooked in the past. But that didn't prevent the anxiety creeping up on him—it was her first time trying his food, so he was antsy to hear what she thought of it.

"How is it?" he asked while she was in the middle of eating. He had tried to stay calm, but his nerves ended up getting the better of him. He really felt like he needed to hear her opinion on the matter.

There were only two answers she could give: good or bad. He'd be happy with the former, and dumbfounded with the latter. He waited with bated breath at her response.

"Huh? Why does this...?"

It was an answer he hadn't expected. Fuyuka was speechless, and tears started to well up in her eyes, then subsequently trickled down her face. She tried fruitlessly to wipe them away with the back of her hands, but she couldn't stop herself from weeping.

"Is it that bad?"

She shook her head and sniffled, "No, that's not it."

"Then why are you crying?"

"It's just..."

He could barely hear her, but Asahi was able to make out the faint whisper that followed.

"This dish brings back memories."

He didn't know what she'd meant by that, but he didn't think prying any further would be wise. As she continued to wipe her tears, Asahi concluded that the best course of action would be to leave her alone.



Her crying wasn't an act—her feelings were genuine.

*

10 minutes had elapsed. Asahi figured it was okay to finally enter the room again. Fuyuka's eyes were still puffy and red from her crying spell, but she was calmer than before.

"That was quite unsightly of me, crying in front of you."

"I didn't see anything, so don't worry about it."

"I would appreciate it if that were the case," she answered.

He looked away and focused his attention on the bowl she had returned, which had been vacated of its contents. She'd polished it off while he was gone.

"It was delicious. Thank you," she informed him in a cold, calm tone. Her usual demeanor had returned, it seemed.

It was nice to hear that she enjoyed it, at least, and Asahi let out a sigh of relief.

"When are your parents coming back, by the way?"

He was aware he was only taking care of her temporarily. Her parents would have to take over sooner or later. Any way he looked at it, the best option would be to have her parents look after her. That's how it was for normal families, at least in Asahi's eyes.

However, he soon realized that his question was a mistake.

"They won't be returning."

"So you live alone?"

"That is indeed the case."

In a way, it made sense in a way to him—of course someone named "The Ice Queen" lived by her lonesome in an expensive apartment. It suited her to a tee.

"Just like me, then."

"What do you mean?"

"I live alone too."

He wasn't a rich kid or anything like that, but it was true that he lived alone, as well.

"You live by yourself in such a large apartment?" she asked dubiously.

"You literally live in the same kind of apartment."

“Well... Let’s just say I have circumstances.”

“I do too, you know? You could say I’m special.”

Asahi proceeded to explain his reason for living alone.

When he and his parents had moved here, his parents’ restaurant happened to be thriving. After some consideration, both of them had decided it would be better to stay at their old house which was closer to the restaurant. That left Asahi in their new place by himself.

“... Basically, until things calm down over there, I’m in charge of holding the fort down here. I barely use any of the space besides this room, the kitchen, and the bathroom, though.”

Fuyuka silently listened to the whole story. It was only after he’d finished that she chose to speak up.

“It looks as though your parents hold a great deal of trust in you.”

“I guess so.”

Being left alone was actually quite a struggle, considering that he needed to balance his studies, his obligations at school, and maintain the house. He was more or less used to fending for himself even prior to the move, but he still had some trouble with said balance. If he’d ever end up in the same situation as Fuyuka, he’d probably push himself to keep up with his tasks, regardless of whether or not it was painful for him.

When he realized she was in the same boat, it grabbed his attention. He knew how difficult it was to live alone. What sort of special circumstances did she have?

Her mood had visibly worsened when the topic was brought up, so Asahi thought it unwise to delve deeper. It was a personal matter, after all, and she’d likely shy away from him. After he’d said his piece, he left the room once again.

Chapter Two

A Once-in-a-Lifetime Smile

Three days had passed since Fuyuka had suffered from a cold and Asahi had taken care of her. It was Monday, which marked the beginning of a new week.

Classes had already finished for the day, but Asahi wasn't heading home just yet. He'd promised his friend Chiaki that he'd remain at school with him so they could study together. The sky outside was dimming rapidly; however, Asahi had fortunately anticipated this outcome—he'd done his laundry and prepared the night's dinner earlier that morning prior to leaving for school.

Unfortunately, he didn't have enough time to complete all of the problems he'd personally assigned himself. Or, rather, it was more an issue with his concentration—he'd found himself unable to focus on solving all of the questions. The reason behind this was none other than Fuyuka Himuro, The Ice Queen.

I'm just glad that she was able to recover from that fever, at least, Asahi thought to himself.

Chiaki had told him earlier, but she'd attended classes earlier that day as if nothing had ever happened. She behaved the same as usual and ignored everyone—a clear sign that she'd made a complete recovery from her illness. That should've been the end of things. Asahi didn't think much about what happened after that... or, at least, that's what he tried to tell himself.

Once he returned home, collecting the clothes that he'd left out to dry was the first priority. As he folded them, he went over the math problems he hadn't been able to complete at school. His parents always gave him a hefty allowance so that he could fully concentrate on his studies. That was something he knew he had to stay on top of. He didn't particularly dislike studying, although as of late, a few subjects—such as Math and English—had been the source of several headaches.

I should probably try to solve a couple more questions before getting dinner ready, he mused to himself as he continued to sort the laundry.

Once he'd finished with his clothes, he went straight to his room and opened his notebook. The first page was covered in traces of half-assed

equations and smudges of mistakes he'd erased. The moment he decided to turn to a blank page and get to studying, something unexpected occurred.

Ding dong.

"Who could it be this late?"

At first, he thought it might be Chiaki. When he thought it over more, though, there was no chance it would've been him—he always let Asahi know beforehand if he was coming over to hang out. That scratched the possibility of it being him off the list. That meant that it had to be another friend of his, but even that seemed unlikely. Perhaps it was someone dropping off a delivery? But, no, he was certain he hadn't ordered anything recently.

Because he was absolutely clueless as to who rang the bell, he headed straight for the camera attached to the intercom to check who it was. It was the safest choice to make, considering the circumstances.

What he hadn't expected was a certain black-haired beauty to be the one waiting on the other side of the door.

"What do you want?" he asked as he opened the door. Fuyuka was standing in front of him in what could be considered everyday attire: a button-up shirt and a pair of jeans. He wasn't used to seeing her in clothes outside of her uniform at all, so it briefly threw him for a loop.

He wasn't able to conceal his utter surprise. How could he? Of all the people he'd thought of, Fuyuka was not even close to being on the list. As he tried to look anywhere but in her direction, she presented him with a white envelope.

"Please take this," she said.

"And this is...?"

"My thanks for everything that happened the other day," she followed up while thrusting the envelope toward him. He smiled awkwardly as she essentially forced him into taking it.

Although he knew what she meant by "the other day," he didn't quite understand why she felt inclined to thank him. It wasn't like he'd done anything that merited her gratitude. He opened the envelope and spotted a ten thousand yen bill inside.

"I can't accept this. I don't remember doing anything to deserve this."

"That won't do. You must factor in not only the time you spent caring for me, but also the cost of the supplies—the cooling packs, the ice pillows, the sports drink, and..."

Asahi sighed deeply as she rattled off the costs of her "maintenance." *Are you telling me this is how she thinks she's going to "pay me back" for the favor?*

Actually, this was quite fitting for The Ice Queen to do. He understood that Fuyuka was simply trying to be courteous in her own unique way, but he didn't really share the same sentiment. Shoving money in his face wasn't the best way to thank him.

"I'm not taking this, no matter what you say. I took care of you out of good faith. I wasn't expecting any sort of compensation in return for what I did."

"But..."

Fuyuka was speechless as Asahi handed the envelope back to her. She was completely stumped by his defiance and didn't know how to react in such a situation.

Given the abrupt visit and the normal conversation they were having, it was clear to Asahi that, despite her recovery, the fever had thawed a small portion of her icy disposition. He could actually read the combination of confusion and mild irritation on her face—something that would have been unthinkable even just a few days ago.

Despite multiple attempts to assure her that she didn't have to worry about it anymore, Fuyuka wasn't the sort who liked remaining indebted to someone. She rooted herself to the spot and stared awkwardly at him. It didn't look as though she was ready to admit defeat just yet.

Knowing her, I bet she's just trying to think of another way to repay me... Wait, I have an idea, Asahi mused.

"Actually... You're good at studying and all that, yeah?" he asked her.

"I guess you could say that."

"How about you help me with my studies, then? If you do that, you can consider us even."

"And that would be good enough for you?"

"Yeah."

Fuyuka was merely being modest—Asahi was aware that she was at the top of their class when it came to marks. Getting her help would greatly improve his scores, not to mention he'd finally be able to tackle the problems he was having trouble with earlier.

"Very well then," she responded after a short moment of silence. With his confirmation, she accepted his offer somewhat reluctantly. "If you'll

excuse me," she followed up, heading toward him.

"Huh?" Asahi quickly blurted out, his eyes widening in shock.

She didn't pay much heed as she side-stepped him and made her way into his place. "What are you so surprised about?" she asked. "You said you wanted me to help with your studies, didn't you?"

"I... I guess so, yeah."

He hadn't expected her to just barge in like that, however. He'd assumed they'd figure out a time and place to meet up, not right then and there. It had definitely caught him off-guard.

I thought she was The Ice Queen? What the hell's wrong with her? he thought.

As she headed inside, he turned around in confusion and faced her petite, yet imposing, back. This was his second time interacting with Fuyuka, the Ice Queen, out of coincidence; it was also the second time she'd subverted his expectations.

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Fuyuka quickly proved that it wasn't mere luck that had landed her at the top of his class. All the math problems that he'd been struggling with, she solved with ease. She was able to explain all the core concepts he hadn't gotten a grasp of in a way that was easy for him to understand, as well.

"Use the second equation here, then apply a quadratic formula, and you'll be able to get the final result. The next question uses the same method. Make sure you don't forget this method in the middle of the problem-solving portion."

Her class was an incredibly efficient one; with her assistance, Asahi managed to solve all the questions he'd previously left blank.

I wonder if she feels the same as I do whenever I try to explain things to Chiaki, he pondered to himself.

The fact that she even had some secret tricks to solve problems that the teachers had never mentioned really made it clear to him that she excelled in her studies. She was certainly leagues above him, at any rate, and acted more like a teacher than the professionals they had at school as the lesson progressed.

“Damn, you’re good at this. Honestly, if you were my teacher, I wouldn’t complain at all.”

“You're overestimating me. If you have time to fool around, then surely you have time to solve this problem here.”

He focused his attention back to the notebook, but Asahi heard her sigh ever so slightly. There wasn't much he could think of as a reply, so he just forced a smile.

She’s a weird one, that’s for sure, he noted.

Her attitude was as cold as ever, but she didn’t attempt to push him away whenever he inquired about the problems. She would always answer in a way he could comprehend and even complimented him whenever he actually understood something and applied it to the problems at hand.

Leaving aside the matter of debt and repayment, he felt that he'd finally caught a glimpse of The Ice Queen's “human” side. Her movements and speech had a very regal and subtle method about them, but he slowly adapted to how to read her based on her expressions and movements.

She was acting so out of character to him that he actually found it endearing to a certain degree. Although he had to admit that a lot of the preconceptions he held about her were based on Chiaki's impressions. His friend constantly talked about her being a different kind of person.

“You calculated this incorrectly.”

“Oh, I did. Oh God, how could I fail at simple addition?”

“You’d better start taking this seriously. The test relies on these equations, so you need to drill them into your head.”

Fuyuka quietly sighed to herself again at Asahi's basic blunder. She tried to make sure he didn't hear her, but he did anyway. It was difficult for him to focus, though—he still couldn't come to terms with what was happening in front of him. He never thought he’d get the opportunity to study with The Ice Queen herself, or to be able to see her express herself in ways he’d never imagined.

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One hour had passed since Fuyuka agreed to help Asahi with his studies, and most of his questions were already complete. She was a proficient teacher, and he had been a fast learner. He had also tried—for the

most part—to concentrate while she assisted him, which had contributed to things progressing quickly.

"Is one hour of studying really okay with you? I don't think it's nearly enough after all you did for me, but..."

"What are you talking about? Anyone could've taken care of you, but no one else could've helped me with these math problems. In fact, I should be the one owing *you*."

Fuyuka's face said it all—she clearly disagreed with Asahi and placed more stock into his efforts than he did. She wasn't ready to surrender just yet, but Asahi also wasn't planning on budging and asking her for anything else.

He'd briefly considered proposing that she come every day to help him out for the upcoming test, but that would've been a bother to her eventually. Plus, he wasn't looking forward to the idea of having a daily Ice Queen studying session, so he quickly dropped that idea.

And so, after a lengthy back-and-forth between the two, Fuyuka—who had remained steadfast about assisting him until the bitter end—finally agreed to leave it at that.

"In any case, let's just complete these remaining problems. If we're quick about it, we can have them done in 30 minutes or less."

"Uh, yeah, I suppose. Let's see, the next one... Actually, wait a sec."

Just as he'd readied himself for the final push, a sound rang out from the kitchen. Asahi got up and rushed over after he'd gotten the okay from Fuyuka.

"What was that sound just now?"

"My rice cooker. I programmed it while I was taking my break," he replied from the kitchen as he fiddled with the appliance in an attempt to stop the grating beeping sounds.

"Now that you mention it, you were in the kitchen earlier. So that's what you were doing?"

Asahi had taken a brief 10-minute break some time ago, which had allowed him to quickly finish folding his clothes and prepare some rice. By pouring it into the rice cooker with some water, he was able to set the timer to go off when he'd predicted he'd be done with his studies.

He lifted the lid and was immediately engulfed in a cloud of steam and the characteristic fragrance of cooked rice. There hadn't been time to wash it, since the day had unfolded in a completely different fashion from what

he'd planned. As a result, the rice was extra fluffy. Without much time to dedicate to that day's dinner, he had decided to make some curry with rice.

Grumble.

A familiar sound echoed throughout the kitchen. Fuyuka was standing there, and the noise caused her face to turn a deep shade of crimson.

"I prepped some curry in advance. You're more than welcome to join me if you want."

Homemade curry was completely different from the roux sold at markets, but the latter could be stored easily and wasn't quick to spoil—even after months in the cupboard. Nevertheless, Asahi had made curry the day prior so he could enjoy it that night. As he was preoccupied with contemplating the intricacies of curry, he failed to notice Fuyuka's death glare, or the fact that her cheeks were as red as a Fuji apple.

"I will pass on your offer," she answered with a shake of her head.

I guess she's too embarrassed to say yes? I wish I could read minds, Asahi lamented.

Unfortunately for Fuyuka, her stomach continued to vocalize several times following that, so it completely killed the studying mood that had been cultivated beforehand. Each time it growled, she would tremble slightly in mortification.

"I'm not going to add this to your tab or whatever, so don't worry. You don't need to hold back."

"But..."

"Like I said before, I really don't mind. Come on, join me."

Asahi was perturbed after her stomach started acting strangely, so he insisted on having her for dinner. How could they have studied properly under those conditions anyway?

The thought that Fuyuka could simply return next door and eat her own dinner did not occur to either of them.

After a short period of silence, Fuyuka finally gave a muted nod. Her face was still as red as could be.

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Fortunately, Asahi had possessed the foresight to prepare enough rice for dinner and tomorrow's lunch, so there was plenty for him and Fuyuka to

share.

"Thanks for the food," they both said in unison.

They grasped their spoons and scooped some curry into their mouths. The level of spice was quite mild, and the rich flavor quickly spread across their tongues. Although it wasn't homemade curry, it was pretty appetizing nonetheless.

"It's quite delicious," Fuyuka said after she'd savored the initial spoonful. Clearly, she appreciated the cooked meal.

"Thanks."

Asahi braced himself, just in case she was about to break out into another waterworks show like she had three days ago, but—thankfully—nothing of the sort happened. They both enjoyed their meal without incident. Then again, it had been a touch awkward on account of the silence that persisted the entire meal. The only thing that could be heard was the sounds of their spoons clinking against the dishes.

Asahi finished way before Fuyuka, and, wanting to avoid the awkwardness of waiting on her to finish her meal, decided to return to solving his math problems to kill some time. He moved to the sofa near the table and placed his notebook on the coffee table in front of him. Just a few hours ago, these equations had felt like an impossible task. Now, thanks to Fuyuka's guidance, he was more than prepared to take them on alone. What method should he use for the first problem? He quickly dove in. At least, that's what he'd hoped to do—his mind was still sluggish from the hearty curry he'd just polished off. It was impossible for him to actually concentrate on the task at hand.

"Your cooking is very good, Kagami."

Wait, she's the one initiating a conversation with me? Did I hit my head during the meal or something?

Fuyuka didn't seem to be the type of person who minded silence, like the situation they were currently in. The fact that she struck up a conversation was unthinkable for Asahi.

When did she decide to start calling me by my surname? All she's ever referred to me as is 'you' until now. I know that's how she'd normally address me, but I kinda have a bad feeling about this...

"I'd like to think I'm pretty good at it. Gotta thank my parents for that."

"Your parents, you say?"

"My dad's a chef, and my mom's a patissier."

She gasped slightly in admiration and looked his way. He didn't think he'd said anything outrageous just then—so what brought about the reaction? He didn't see any reason for it in his parents' occupation.

"Does that mean that you also wish to become a chef in the future?"

"Maybe, maybe not. I haven't decided yet. When I was little, I really wanted to be one. My parents encouraged me a lot, too. But now, I wouldn't particularly mind following another path."

"And your parents didn't say anything about it?"

"Well, they definitely seemed disappointed that I was thinking of other options, that's for sure."

Fuyuka directed her gaze toward him, focusing on him rather than her food. She seemed very engrossed in the conversation now, and Asahi noticed her concerned expression.

"But the only thing they actually said was that I should do whatever I feel I want to do."

"Your family seems very supportive."

"I'm still thankful that they taught me how to cook, at least. Otherwise I'd be a bum who couldn't make anything for himself."

Asahi wasn't exactly the talkative type, either. He was taken aback at himself—there hadn't been many times where he'd been as engaged in a conversation as he was then. Maybe it was because his mood had lifted at the thought of being a part of the rare event. Or maybe it was because, for whatever reason, she seemed rather downtrodden, and he wanted to lift her spirits somehow. It was common to talk with others in one's daily life, but talking to *the* Ice Queen was not. Something about that moment in particular intrigued him and drew him in; he wanted to be a part of it.

They continued to chat for a while about this and that—methods for making curry, things that must be noted when storing it, their studies, and so on. This continued right until Fuyuka had finished her meal.

"Hopefully we've been able to silence your tummy."

"Thank you for the food."

Asahi tried to joke around a little, but she ignored his gag and pierced him with her trademark icy stare. He realized that messing around was probably not the best idea just yet.

"You can just put your dishes in the dishwasher."

"Very well," Fuyuka answered along with a nod. She quickly gathered her spoon, plate, and glass, then headed toward the kitchen.

Hopefully now we'll be able to study without any issues, Asahi hoped as he waited for her to return.

"Hey, Himuro—"

Asahi was going to propose a short 10-minute break before they resumed studying so the food wouldn't hinder their concentration, but he was interrupted by noises coming from the kitchen. He could make out running water, as well as the clanging of cutlery being shuffled about.

"What are you doing?" Asahi asked as he made his way toward the kitchen.

"I'm cleaning the dishes," she retorted in an incredulous tone, as if it was the most obvious thing for her to do.

Asahi peeked over at her. She was wearing rubber gloves as she brandished a sponge in one hand and a plate in the other. It was clear as day what she was doing, but he still felt awkward watching her wash his dishes.

"I can do that later; don't worry about it," he spoke up, although what he had really wanted to say was, "Why would you push yourself to do that?"

"I won't allow that. It's the very least I can do," she replied.

"Well... okay. That would really help."

He'd only known her from the small handful of interactions within the past two days, but he knew by now that arguing with her over something like that would be wasted effort. He let it be—the best thing to do would be to give in and let her do the dishes. It was a win-win situation for him, either way, so why not?

"... And what are you doing, exactly?"

"Just watching you clean the dishes," Asahi answered. He tried to imitate the same incredulous tone she'd used just a few moments ago.

She briefly stared at him with a puzzled expression, but quickly turned around and ignored him in favor of completing her self-assigned task.

Asahi contemplated returning to the living room to work on those yet-unfinished problems, but he soon dismissed that plan. He didn't feel very confident about leaving Fuyuka in the kitchen alone. Plus, it was so out of character to witness someone as regal and stoic as her washing the dishes that he felt the need to stay, even if he knew it probably wasn't as big of a deal as he was making it out to be.

"Can I ask you something, Himuro?"

"As long as I can—or wish to—answer it."

“Do you normally cook food for yourself?”

Fuyuka didn’t reply with words—instead, she ended up dropping one of the glasses she was in the process of cleaning. Fortunately, it wasn’t from a high distance, and it was made out of plastic either way. Was the question really that big of a deal to her?

“Why would you ask me something like that?” she shakily replied as she scooped up the errant glass from the sink. Her face was flushed red yet again.

“I was just curious; that’s all.”

“I invoke my right to remain silent.”

“Oh, sure...”

Tch. Shouldn’t have asked her that.

Asahi decided to stay in the kitchen and observe her as she cleaned the rest of the dishes. He wanted to speak up a couple of times and comment on her technique, but he figured it was best to hold his tongue while she was working. In his eyes—as someone who knew his way around a kitchen—Fuyuka was clearly a novice. Although she garnered a reputation for being the perfect girl at school, it was possible she didn’t know how to cook at all. It was that gap in preconception and reality that intrigued him.

“I mean, there’s no need to get so embarrassed. You don’t have to hide it—there’re tons of girls out there who wouldn’t know a spatula from a whisk.”

“It’s not that I can’t cook, mind you.”

Neither of them was particularly old-fashioned or bound to traditional gender roles when it came to aspects like cooking. Just as men who could cook didn’t put Fuyuka off, in turn, women who couldn’t didn’t put Asahi off. Who cared if The Ice Queen was an accident waiting to happen in the kitchen? Nobody was perfect—everyone had their own weak points.

And although Asahi did care to some extent about the *reason* behind her lack of culinary proficiency, he decided not to broach it. He remained silent as he watched her finish the dishes.

As she continued her task, she grew tired before long. It wasn’t a surprise to Asahi, considering she wasn’t the most experienced. He was worried she’d end up making a mistake and injuring herself, so he decided to try and step in.

“I’ll help you—”

“I’ll do it. You go back to the living room and finish your questions, Kagami.”

As if the very concept of being offered help had been the last straw for her, Fuyuka finally shut Asahi down and demanded he leave. She was dead set on getting everything done by herself, so the best course of action was to concede.

Trying to be helpful all the time is pretty annoying, so whatever, Asahi thought as he watched Fuyuka struggling to scrub the stubborn scraps of curry off the plates.

It was weird to see someone who was so hellbent on keeping others at a distance, but also so dead set on repaying a debt. It hadn’t even been that big of a deal for him personally. The only reason he could think of as an explanation for her behavior was that she was desperately trying to pay him back so she would never have to interact with him again. She was reluctant to open herself up even the slightest bit. Maybe she simply wanted to return to her old self, in which she sealed off her heart to everyone else and kept people at bay. It could be that she wanted to return to her previous relationship with him—where they were essentially strangers who simply happened to live next to each other. Maybe that was why she was going through all of the trouble of helping a classmate and neighbor she barely knew.

“I mean... all that matters is that you have meals to eat in the end, right? It’s not a big deal if you can cook properly or not.”

“What are you going on about?” she replied curtly.

“Nothing. Just something I wanted to say. I’ll shut up and leave now.”

He didn’t care if he came off as some sort of sanctimonious asshole to her; he’d felt so concerned about her for a moment that he’d felt something compelling him to tell her.

“I’d rather not have you collapse like you did the other day again,” he added. “‘You gotta make sure you eat your share...’ Well, my grandpa used to tell me something like that, anyway. I’m just parroting him at this point.”

He felt a pang of embarrassment after repeating his grandpa’s somewhat-coarse words, but it wasn’t like it really mattered—she’d forget about his words by tomorrow, anyway.

He could envision how the rest of the night would go: Fuyuka would assist him with the remainder of the equations and make a quick departure following that.

As he endeavored through his math problems alone, he happened to notice something—or, more accurately, the absence of something. There were no more sounds coming from the kitchen. When he looked up, he saw Fuyuka entering the room.

"I'll keep your words in mind," she said with a warm, bright smile.

This was the first time he'd ever seen The Ice Queen smile. It made his heart race, and he was thoroughly captivated by her for a brief moment.

"Is there something on my face?" she asked.

"Oh, no... I was just thinking that this is the first time I've seen you smile."

Fuyuka quickly shifted back to her frigid poker face and serious demeanor. Unfortunately, she couldn't hide the red color that emanated from her cheeks.

"I can smile just like anyone else can. Didn't you know that?"

"Oh, really now? That's news to me. You always look so stern at school. You've never smiled once."

"What sort of impression do you have of me?" she replied with an exasperated sigh.

The sort of image where there's a reason everyone calls you "The Ice Queen," Himuro...

Fuyuka was someone that, due sheer coincidence, had revealed to Asahi that she was capable of conversing with others, having emotions, and even smiling like the average person. The thought that she'd soon repay her debt and revert to ignoring him made Asahi sad. At the same time, he felt that he'd been treated to the rare occasion of seeing her smile, and that alone had been more than worth it.

Chapter Three

Growing Further Apart

After Fuyuka had paid off her debt in full, Asahi realized that they had reverted back to their previous relationship; one of minimal interaction. No longer were there any mutual greetings if they crossed paths, nor did they spark up any random conversations.

Her demeanor at school hadn't changed—she was as cold and aloof as ever. Rumors about her continued to spread, just as they always had.

Had it all been a dream? Asahi wondered. He could recall her embarrassed expression when her stomach growled that day, as well as the sensation of his heart skipping a beat when she showed him that beautiful smile of hers.

A week had passed, and Fuyuka and Asahi had regressed to being nothing more than strangers. Everything had returned to how it was before.

"Damn, dude—I had no idea you were that smart."

"Well, next to you, anybody'd be considered a genius."

"Pfft. That's a low blow, buddy. At least try comparing yourself to someone who doesn't struggle to pass."

Asahi, Chiaki, and the rest of the class had gotten their tests returned earlier that day, and everyone was looking at their scores and comparing them. They were finally starting to relax after what had been a brutal exam week. When he scanned the class, Asahi could see a wide variety of emotions ranging from absolute despair to pure elation. Chiaki's case was somewhat unusual—his grades were terrible, but he couldn't help but chuckle the moment he received them.

"You ended up 30th out of the 300 students in school, though. Pretty insane, if I do say so myself. Did you use some kinda special technique to study or somethin'?"

"I guess you could call it that."

"Come on, dude, fill me in—I gotta know how to rack up those easy points."

"Let's just say I had someone help me out a bit."

"Oh, I see. Then how about you help me next ti—"

"Hey, don't push it. Just be happy that I told you my secret."

Asahi examined his score sheet while he drowned out Chiaki's endless ranting. They were the best marks he'd managed to receive so far that year. Although his standard studying methods were enough to ensure that he passed with satisfactory grades, they were nothing spectacular. He wasn't the biggest proponent of Chiaki's method of cramming the week before—or, hell, even the *day* before—an exam in an attempt to barely pass. Instead, he preferred to study a small amount each day. That way, he could ensure that his grades would be good enough to pass, but he could also avoid being showered with any unwanted attention.

This time, things were different, however—his grades were significantly higher than they normally were. It had been enough to grant him a spot in the top 10% of the entire school, a feat he'd never pulled off before. The reason was obvious: Fuyuka had helped him study math a week ago. Having the genius who consistently ranked at the top of the school assisting with one's studies would certainly make a difference. But he figured divulging his "secret studying method" to Chiaki would end up being more trouble than it was worth, so he decided to change the topic.

"Anyways, it's no wonder your grades blow—all you do is waste time with your girlfriend."

"What can I say, dude. Gotta give my cutie the attention she deserves."

"Whatever floats your boat, I guess, but you're only proving my point."

To enter any specific Japanese high school, it was required that you pass their entrance exam with a minimum score. Since Asahi and Chiaki attended the same school, it meant that both of them were capable of achieving the same grades. The reason behind their staggering difference was the priority each was willing to give to their studies. After all, Chiaki was a clever and witty guy. If he made an effort, he was certainly capable of doing as well as Asahi... or even better. His main priority was his girlfriend. That caused both him and his girlfriend to be in sync when it came to their grades—hers also weren't the highest, to say the least.

"If you had a girlfriend, you'd get my struggle. We'd definitely be taking the same supplementary classes."

"God. If that ever happened, my parents would force me to live with them again. That'd be rough."

"Wait... that'd mean I couldn't crash at your place anymore, right?"

"Pretty much."

“Okay. Sorry to break it to you, man, but I ain’t letting you get a girlfriend.”

That was pretty apparent to Asahi already. It wasn’t like he was actively seeking a girlfriend at the moment, anyway. He didn’t have a crush on anyone, and he didn’t feel the need to get all cozy and lovey-dovey with someone else, unlike Chiaki. For the time being, studying and getting good grades was his number one priority; he could find a girlfriend later.

“Gotta say—you give me serious “Ice Queen” vibes when you say stuff like that.”

“What does Himuro have to do with anything?”

“I just feel like you two are lackin’ some lovin’, if you catch my drift. You need to work on yourself a little more if you want to achieve that goal, though.”

“Would you shut up already? You’re being a real pain right now.”

“That’s what I’m talking about! Just try smiling a little more, y’know? The hair needs some work, too. I mean, you’re a pretty good-looking guy, man. Don’t let yourself go like this.”

Didn’t know you were the expert on beauty now, Chiaki. Man... I’d love to tell him that, but I’ll just shut up, Asahi thought.

He was well aware that he was weird, and that he wasn’t looking to be in a relationship. The truth was, Asahi wasn’t the chatty type. He disliked long discussions, and the thought of forcing himself to act differently just to try and hook up with someone was off-putting. It would be strange for both him and everyone else if he suddenly became a social butterfly, so he preferred to stay true to himself... even if doing that meant being compared to The Ice Queen.

Not to mention that he had no idea how Chiaki had assessed that he was “good-looking.” No one but his friend had ever told him that. He didn’t think of himself as someone who was outstandingly attractive.

To sum things up—Asahi didn’t want a relationship. The thought of spending time or money on someone else was unappealing, since studying was his main concern. Add to the fact that he’d likely have to change his attitude to please someone else, and his mind was basically set in stone. All in all, he understood where Chiaki was coming from, but he simply wasn’t interested.

“Let’s not talk about this anymore. I’m exhausted.”

“Oh, come on! You’re such a buzzkill. And I was just getting to the good part where I give you a crash course on how to become the school’s lady killer.”

“That alone is already scaring me a bit. I’m done with this, at any rate.”

“Don’t be like that, man. I bet there’re tons of girls out there ready and waiting for you to follow my guidelines.”

“Quit making shit up. You’re the only one who wants me to do that.”

“You just need someone to tell yo—oh, speak of the devil.”

Chiaki grinned, which gave Asahi goosebumps. He had a bad feeling about what was to come next. He turned around only to spot his “greatest enemy,” sapping what little remaining energy he had left.

“Chii-pie! Asahi! How were the tests, guys? Mine turned out horrible!”

“Perfect timing, Hina. You gotta help me formulate a plan so Asahi can become a ladies’ man!” Chiaki said.

“That... sounds super fun, actually! Don’t tell me that Asahi finally has the hots for someone!”

“Would you two just calm down?” Asahi grumbled.

The girl that had just entered their class was none other than Hinami Aiba. She’d burst in with her usual cheerful smile plastered on her face. Her appearance was rather charming in its own way—she had a cute brown bob which perfectly framed her small features. She was always incredibly upbeat and energetic, and could easily make herself the center of attention with her rowdy antics.

Since she was the complete opposite of Asahi, she was the type who drained his energy at an alarming rate. If it weren’t for the fact that she was Chiaki’s girlfriend, Asahi would never even dare approach someone like her. And although Asahi considered her to be his “greatest enemy,” the two actually had a good relationship.

“Since the tests are already over, I bet you two have nothing to do after school today. How about we go to that family restaurant nearby and hang out?” Chiaki proposed.

“Can I refuse?”

“Obviously not!”

“Then why even ask me in the first place...?”

When the couple teamed up against Asahi, he could do nothing to stop them. Since he knew he couldn’t escape from this situation, he figured the

best course of action would simply be to sigh and go along with their proposal.

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After he'd spent a couple of hours with Chiaki and Hinami, Asahi finally decided to return home. A large portion of it had been spent third-wheeling as the couple flirted with each other. The rest had been filled by what he considered to be "pointless drivel" about romance and relationships. Even so, it'd helped Asahi loosen up and take his mind off of school obligations for a while. He didn't dislike spending time with them at all. They were his friends, after all, so he enjoyed being in their company. And although he wasn't the biggest fan of their plan to make him the "hottest guy" at their school, he knew they were only doing it for him. Unfortunately, their ideas on how to get a girl were far from decent.

I just can't get on board with the idea of a "plan" to get girls in the first place—it sounds scummy, he reflected as he headed home. As he tried to get their ridiculous tactics out of his mind, he suddenly remembered that his fridge was bordering on empty. Before arriving at his house, he made a quick detour at a nearby supermarket that was having a special sale for the day. When he entered, he noticed the sizable crowd of customers. Most of them were clearly housewives, and he even spotted a few familiar faces among them. Then he spotted another type of familiar face.

What is she doing here of all places?

It was none other than The Ice Queen herself. The silky, waist-length black hair, which contrasted so starkly with her pale white skin, the graceful silhouette—she was unmistakable. She was walking around the store with a shopping basket in hand. Normally, seeing her in the neighborhood wouldn't have stopped him in his tracks, but the fact that she was situated in front of the section for alcoholic beverages roused his curiosity.

He approached her and asked, "What are you looking for?"

He had originally planned to pass by her without saying anything, but seeing the concerned expression on her face as she surveyed the shelves compelled him to ask. Maybe he could assist her, somehow, even though he expected her to completely ignore him.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

“Don’t answer my question with another one.”

Although her “answer” had been unexpected, he was glad to have struck up a conversation with her again. It was more favorable than being ignored.

“Just like you, I’m here to buy some stuff. Isn’t that obvious?” he finally replied.

“I suppose you’re right,” she said with a small nod.

They lived in the same apartment complex, so unexpectedly running into each other at the nearest supermarket wouldn’t be that outlandish of a scenario.

Actually, this isn’t the first time I’ve seen her here.

He remembered how, ever since he’d figured out she didn’t cook, he’d seen her purchasing things like ready-made meals from time to time. Things were different that day, though—there was an assortment of colorful vegetables in her basket, along with some pork.

“Looks like you’re finally in the mood to cook something yourself, huh?”

“Would you kindly quit implying that I’ve never cooked in my life?”

“Sorry, my bad. Yeah, you did mention last time that you’ve made a few things.”

His blunder earned him her trademark glare. He could tell that cooking wasn’t her strong suit, nor did she have enough passion for it to care to improve. Although Asahi quickly apologized, he could still feel the coldness emanating from her. It made him uneasy—this was one of the first times he was experiencing The Ice Queen’s treatment directly. Her words were as curt and serious as ever, but she wasn’t the same as she usually was at school.

“Anyways, what are you looking for? Aren’t you a little too young to be drinking?” Asahi prodded, taking the fact that he hadn’t been outright ignored as a positive sign.

He knew that Fuyuka had to be well acquainted with the law, considering that her conduct at school was irreproachable. He just couldn’t imagine her to be the type who led a secret double life as an honor student and a devout partier. On the other hand, he couldn’t think of any other reason she would be in that particular section of the store.

After a moment of hesitation, she replied, “I’m just looking for some sake to cook with... But, by the looks of it, they might be out of stock.”

It dawned on him that she wasn't lying. It was right then that Asahi realized that she had truly never cooked a thing in her life. If she had, she would know that cooking sake would be located in the condiments aisle of any supermarket, not the one for alcohol.

She must be in real trouble if she's willing to open up to me about it, he observed.

"If that's what you're looking for, then you gotta go to the condiments aisle."

He thought about adding in a light joke, but then realized a straight answer would probably be for the best. He wasn't sure how Fuyuka would react to his banter, and his previous attempt had brought about less-than-desirable results.

"Thanks for the help," she whispered as she briskly made her way over to the shelves he'd pointed out.

Damn, she looked like a tomato just then. Is it because she realized her mistake?

He assumed that was that, so he continued on his way and pondered about what he should get for himself. Apart from the usual suspects—like missing spices or products he used daily, such as milk—he had to consider his dinner for the night. He also nabbed some items and side dishes that were on sale. After about 20 minutes of browsing and grabbing what he needed, he lined up for the cashier. Buying groceries at that market was already second nature to him. As he headed over to the line, he caught a glimpse of Fuyuka already waiting in the one he'd selected.

"I'm only in this line because it's got the fewest people, by the way," he spoke up.

"I haven't even said anything yet."

Was she going to actually ask me? I don't even really know why I said that, to be honest.

Judging by her furrowed eyes, she was not amused that he'd read her mind. Her basket was fuller than earlier, and he spotted a bottle of cooking sake amidst her other supplies.

"Oh, so you're planning on making some curry, huh?"

"And how would you know that, exactly?"

"I could tell pretty much just by looking at your basket."

"I see..."

She seemed surprised, but it was an easy guess based on the curry powder she was carrying. Combined with the fact that she also had potatoes, onions, and carrots—the usual ingredients for Japanese curry—and it didn't take a genius to figure it out.

She was trying her hand at cooking, so something more complex than curry would've been out of the question. That was Asahi's impression, at least, although he preferred to keep that comment to himself.

"Next one, please," the cashier called out, urging Fuyuka forward and interrupting their conversation.

"Go on, Himuro. It's your turn."

"You don't need to state the obvious," she snapped at him in an angry tone and pierced him with her glare. She wasn't in the mood that day, that was for sure.

Gotta say, it feels pretty weird to have a normal conversation with her of all people.

It would make for a good tale to tell others at school, but nobody would believe him. Plus, he wasn't the type to gossip or run his mouth. He'd just happened to run into her at the supermarket and had a short exchange with her, nothing more and nothing less.

As he silently waited for his turn, he watched Fuyuka pay for her items.

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"You want me to carry those for you?"

He came across Fuyuka again on his way back home from the supermarket. She hadn't waited for him so they could go back together or anything of the sort. He just happened to see her from behind as he was walking home. She was carrying two large bags, one in each hand. Based on her stagger, and the fact that the bags continuously threatened to graze the ground, she clearly was experiencing some trouble carrying them.

"I'll have to decline," she answered after a short period of silence. Classic. Her words were polite, but he could feel the chill from her curt refusal.

She turned down everyone's offers, no matter what they were. She kept everyone at a distance and never allowed anyone to get close to her. At

some point, Asahi had believed that maybe that had been the key to her current academic success.

"You sure? To me, it looks like you're struggling to even lift them properly."

"I'm fine. Don't mind me. Go your own way."

It's funny how she insists that it's "fine," even though it's pretty obvious that it's not.

Judging by the contents in her basket back at the supermarket, and based on the size of her bags, Asahi quickly surmised that she had to be carrying a little over five kilograms. That included the bottle of cooking sake she'd bought. He didn't offer to help her just because she was a girl or anything, but because it was clear as day that she was struggling to carry the bags.

"The block's pretty close, so at least let me carry one of those until we're there. No need to repay me after, if that's what you're trying to avoid," he said as he began to approach her.

He was solely focused on helping her, so he hadn't realized that she'd treated him as if he were a complete stranger when she refused—or that a stranger pushing to help out in that way would be extremely off-putting to anyone.

"I believe I've already told you to stay away from me," she replied in a frigid tone, her face expressionless. It was a merciless answer to his kindness, and it slowly dawned on him that she'd already erected a sturdy wall between them. He should've realized it earlier. "I've already repaid my debt. Please make sure to stay away from me from now on."

"Okay," he responded after some hesitation.

Asahi realized that she didn't want his help and considered him to be more of a pest than anything else. Even though he was only trying to be considerate, she took that as another favor that would need to be returned. In the end, it was up to her if she wanted him to close the distance or not. She had rejected his help, and that was that.

"Just be careful on your way home," he finally said as he passed beside her and headed home. He didn't look back after that.

The harsh, icy wind picked up, heralding the arrival of night along with the setting sun.

Chapter Four

Breaking the Ice

It was the day after Asahi had run into Fuyuka at the supermarket.

He was on his way home when he noticed her standing outside of that exact same store. Just like yesterday, she seemed to be searching for something. This time, however, her demeanor was more frantic and troubled than when he'd come across her attempting to locate the cooking sake. He knew the source of her erratic behavior, since he'd heard about it from Chiaki and Hinami earlier that day—apparently, she had lost the blue ribbon that she was always wearing.

It had clearly been something she cherished a lot, so everyone in class had been quick to speculate about the reason behind its sudden disappearance. Had she simply forgotten it at home? Or perhaps she'd lost it unknowingly somewhere?

As he watched her frantic figure from afar, Asahi realized that the gossip had been true—he couldn't see anything resembling her trademark ribbon. It was unusual to spot her without it. He was also aware of how precious it was to her, which made the situation even stranger. He contemplated the idea of aiding in her search, but quickly reconsidered.

She explicitly told me yesterday to stay away from her, so... Asahi thought as he recalled the cold words she had told him the night before.

He decided to go back home and let her be, but Fuyuka noticed his presence as he passed by her.

"Ah!" she softly gasped before quickly averting her gaze. She clearly wanted to tell him something, but she couldn't quite seem to force the words out.

When she did, Asahi found himself stopping in his tracks and speaking up.

"Want me to help you look for your ribbon? I'm guessing you've lost it."

No answer. She raised her head to look at him, but when their eyes met, she quickly looked down again. Her emotions were in a figurative tug-of-war with each other. On one hand, she wanted to find her prized possession as quickly as possible. But, on the other hand, she was incredibly reluctant to have someone assist her. She remained silent, but unconsciously reached

her left hand out and brushed a strand of hair where her ribbon would normally be fixed.

Asahi let out a sigh. He knew that she was reluctant to ask him for help, but he decided to do it regardless. All he needed to do now was to steel himself for the backlash that would inevitably be wrought upon him for offering a hand.

“Just tell me the general area where you think you lost it.”

“What?” Fuyuka blurted out in surprise.

“I’m just asking in case I get lucky and end up finding it on my way home.”

“It was when I was returning home from the supermarket yesterday.”

“Oh, okay,” he said with a short nod.

The most likely scenario was that—while she had been struggling to carry the heavy bags back to her residence—she hadn’t noticed the ribbon slipping out of her hair. It had been windier than usual, so the ribbon must have been blown away somewhere. Still, there was a slight chance that wasn’t the case and that it was still in the vicinity.

“Oh, well... Hope I’m lucky and find it.”

He knew that any straightforward attempt to try and help her would lead to an instant rejection, so he figured it would be best to head home as he’d originally planned. He turned around and began walking. This time, he actually looked back and witnessed the distressed girl scouring the area, nearly on the brink of tears.

Logically speaking, it was up to chance whether she would find the ribbon or not. If it had been swept away by the wind, which was the most likely scenario, it was as good as gone. For all they knew, it could have been carried to the nearby sea or a river, and it would be impossible to retrieve. Plus, in the unlikely scenario that someone else had come across it, it wasn’t the sort of item you could turn in to the police. It would be difficult to tell who it had originally belonged to, after all. There was also the possibility that somebody considered the ribbon to be nothing more than trash, and thus was currently sitting at the bottom of a garbage can somewhere.

Even with all the odds stacked up against her, Fuyuka continued to desperately search for the ribbon. Asahi’s heart was moved, and he made up his mind—he would help her, even if she was vehemently against the notion deep down.

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The next day, Asahi headed to the police station after school on the slim chance that he could find the ribbon in the lost and found.

"Nope, nothing," he said after a bout of unsuccessful rummaging.

"Actually, there was a girl asking about a ribbon yesterday, as well," one of the policemen mentioned.

The girl—who was obviously Fuyuka—had had the same idea as Asahi. She had started there before moving on to the market to continue her search on her own, which was when he'd spotted her. Following that, she had moved on to the area between the supermarket and their apartment block.

Asahi thought again about the insurmountable odds that she was now facing. It seemed that she had realized it too, because he saw her shed a few tears and occasionally bite her lip as she combed through a patch of grass on the side of the road.

It baffles me that she won't ask for anyone's help, even though she's lost something that she really cares about.

She remained cold and distant from everyone at school, but when Asahi looked closer, he realized that her frigid wall had several cracks in its foundation. It compelled him to find a way to help her in a way where she wouldn't be forced to ask. By doing that, everyone would be happy, or so he thought.

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Considering midterms were now a distant memory, everyone at school was more rambunctious than normal. The class was bursting at the seams with lively conversation whenever it was lunchtime, rowdy students were dotted about everywhere in the hallways, and many would go out to the courtyard to play whatever sport they fancied.

Asahi basked in the afternoon sunlight that streamed in by his seat right beside the window. He had yawned several times that day, but the last one had been so strong that his eyes had begun to water slightly.

"So sleepy..." he mumbled.

"You need some sleep? C'mon, dude—you know staying up late playing video games is bad for your health."

“Speak for yourself.”

Asahi and Chiaki were having lunch in class. Suddenly, their peaceful meal was interrupted by a sprightly individual.

“I’m joining the partyyy!”

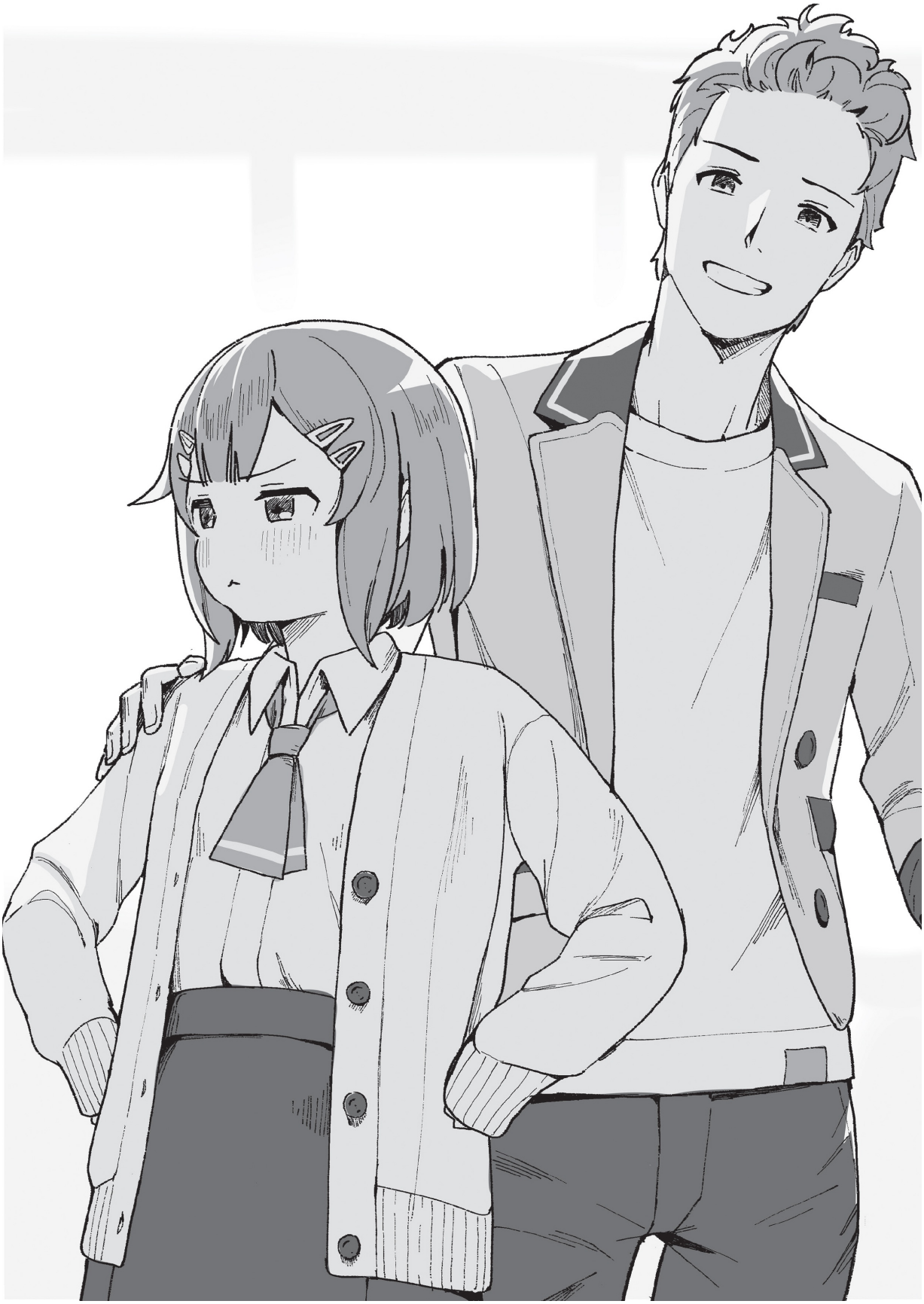
“Hey, we’ve been waiting for you!”

Hinami popped up with her lunch box, and Chiaki greeted her with a wide smile. Asahi yawned again, stayed silent for a moment or two, and then finally muttered a noncommittal, “Hey.”

“What kind of a reaction is that?! I came here ‘cause you asked, and this is how you greet me?!” she exclaimed with a pout. She drew up a chair and sat next to them.

It was just as she’d said—Asahi had invited both her and Chiaki to eat with him that day.

Chiaki and Asahi would often eat together, being that they were in the same class. And although Hinami usually accompanied them, it was a rare occurrence that she did so because Asahi had invited her. The couple had been surprised when he’d asked them.



"What reaction were you even expecting?"

"Maybe, like, 'Asahi's coming in hot too!' You know, something like that?"

"Pfft. Pass. Besides, I couldn't imagine why I'd say that, considering I've been here the whole time. You're the one who just got here," Asahi answered. His remark riled Hinami up even more.

Chiaki, who had been munching on his sandwich during their exchange, finally managed to intervene.

"You know this is how Asahi's always been. Lay off him a little."

Hinami and Asahi concluded that their bickering was a wasted effort, so they both nodded and shut their mouths. After a short moment of silence, Asahi figured that it was time for him to explain why he'd set this all up in the first place.

"I'm gonna ask you two something, and you're gonna have to give it some thought and answer seriously, okay?"

They seemed confused by what he'd said.

"If you two found an item that somebody had lost on the street, what would be the first thing you'd do?" Asahi asked.

"Why would you ask us such a weird question?" Hinami, who was still visibly perplexed, inquired.

Chiaki seemed to have realized something, because he clapped his hands together and grinned before answering, "Oh, I know what you're doing! This is one of those psychological tests or something, isn't it?"

"Hey, I know about those! Nice going, Chii-pie! You're a total genius!"

"Asahi's just trying to strip us down mentally and psychoanalyze our core!"

"Aaah! How dare you, Asahi! You pervert!"

"It's just a simple question. No need to read into it so much," Asahi said, shutting them down.

Their shoulders drooped at his reply. They had been pretty excited just mere moments ago, but it had dissipated in the blink of an eye.

"Aw man. And here I was all excited about what it might be..."

"I shouldn't have gotten my hopes up, even if you were the one who invited us..."

"Why are you two trying to shift the blame onto me?" Asahi grumbled. Since they were simply teasing him, he ignored him and continued with his question. "Anyway, about what I just asked—what's your answer?"

“I mean, it’s too broad a question. It’d depend on what it was,” Chiaki pointed out.

“Yeah! If it was cash, I’d take it to the police. But if it were a pair of gloves or something, I’d probably just ignore them,” Hinami added.

“Oh, right... I guess someone can lose their clothes too, huh?”

“Yeah! But, wait... what would happen to them if they lost all their clothes?”

“They’d just go home buck-naked.”

“Nah, no way! What kind of freak would do that?!”

Both of them wanted Asahi to clarify the situation, so he began to think about how he should rephrase his question. If he was too careless, they’d find out the truth behind his motives. He wanted to avoid that if possible, since they’d never let him hear the end of it.

“Let’s just assume that it’s something precious to the one who lost it.”

“Oh, so now we’re adding someone into the equation? I thought it was just some random lost item.”

“You mean something like a diamond, for example?”

“Uh, something of the sort, maybe,” he answered half-heartedly.

Obviously, he was asking them so he could gain some insight—or, hopefully, a lead—on Fuyuka’s lost ribbon. If he knew how other people would act in such a scenario, maybe he’d be able to come up with some sort of plan on how to search for it.

“I mean, in that case... I’d probably carry it to the police station?”

“For sure. You could also try leaving it in a place nearby where it’ll stand out.”

“Oh, right, since the owner would probably go back there and try to find it. Mhm.”

“Are there any other options in the first place? The only other thing I could think of, aside from the ones we mentioned, would be to straight-up ignore it and mind my own business.”

Asahi knew they were answering earnestly, but he’d already tried the police station, and Fuyuka would have found it by now if it had been left where it was lost. He would have to go about this the hard way.

“But wait...” Hinami piped up, interrupting Asahi’s train of thought.

“What’s up, Hina? Something on your mind?”

“Well, it’s kinda embarrassing to talk about it, but...” she trailed off, scratching her head awkwardly. She blushed a bit as she continued, “Didn’t

you guys ever pick random stuff off the ground when you were little?"

"Oh yeah—all kinds of pebbles and stuff with cool white stripes on 'em. I remember picking up branches and swinging them around like they were epic swords. You catch my drift?" Chiaki answered.

"Exactly, I knew you would get it!" Hinami exclaimed joyfully, as if she had just found a kindred spirit. She wasn't as embarrassed as she had been earlier. "When I was little, I remember I used to constantly pick up these pretty little beads that people dropped. I'm pretty sure it was over at the park. I just wanted to mention that, you know?"

The conversation that they were so enthusiastically engaged in made Asahi recall something from 10 years ago. He was still quite young at the time, so he couldn't remember the details vividly, but he recalled a girl in his class boasting to the other kids about an accessory she'd happened to pick up. It resembled a shiny rock, and she'd gotten it from a bench at the park. She'd liked it so much that she'd decided to take it home with her.

If memory serves, her parents got pretty pissed at her for that.

He was well aware that he shouldn't take what wasn't his, but kids didn't really have much of a moral compass. They couldn't really understand what was considered "right" or "wrong" at their age, and it was difficult for them to foresee the consequences of their own actions. It was understandable if they coveted something they'd happened across because they considered it "cool" or "beautiful."

Maybe that's it... A kid could've gotten a hold of it, Asahi thought.

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Four days had passed since the mysterious disappearance of Fuyuka's prized ribbon. Since then, Asahi had spotted her searching for it daily while on the way home. After some time, he'd stopped paying much attention to her. Some days, he'd even chosen the long way around just to avoid seeing her at all.

The day was just like any other—classes had ended, and Asahi was heading straight home. He happened to come across Fuyuka, who was still hunting for her ribbon. This time, instead of ignoring her, he decided to speak up.

"Hey."

“What do you want?” she asked, looking at him with distrust.

He couldn’t sense the usual coldness in her voice, however. It was clear that she was worn out and couldn’t muster the energy to summon her usual frigid façade.

“I assume you haven’t found it yet.”

Fuyuka didn’t reply—what he’d said was spot-on. Although the chances of discovering the ribbon were slim to begin with, she clung to the faint hope of being able to find it. That’s what had kept her going. Her eyes were devoid of any life, and hearing the reality of the situation from Asahi just made things worse.

“*Sob*...”

Her head drooped, and she started to weep heavily. Crystalline tears fell from her eyes and, one by one, traveled down her porcelain cheeks, staining the ground.

“Here,” Asahi said, figuring that it was time to interject.

She checked the item he presented her through a flurry of tears; in his hand was a shiny blue ribbon.

“Why do you have this...?” she sputtered, unable to believe her eyes.

No wonder she looks so surprised. I mean, she’s been looking for this for days on end, Asahi observed.

“A kid that lives nearby found it on her way home and took it.”

After he’d heard Hinami’s suggestion a few days ago, Asahi went around the neighborhood and asked the families that lived in the area about the ribbon. He’d had no luck two days ago, but fortune had smiled on him yesterday, and he’d finally found it.

He’d come across a girl in the area prancing around with a fairly large pouch. Inside, there had been all sorts of little trinkets: beads, badges, and one conspicuous blue ribbon. He was quickly able to identify it as Fuyuka’s lost possession. After he’d talked to the kid for a while, he’d found out that it was indeed as Hinami had suggested—she’d found the ribbon on the ground a few days prior and picked it up for herself.

“The little girl wanted me to let you know that she’s sorry,” Asahi continued as he handed it over to Fuyuka.

She was still stunned and unable to process what was occurring in front of her eyes, but accepted the item anyway. After she’d inspected it closely and ascertained it to be the genuine article, a look of relief washed over her face.

“It’s Mom’s... It truly is... I’m s-so happy right now...” she whispered through sobs. She was still crying, but this time, her tears were ones of happiness.

After wiping her eyes, she fastened the ribbon back in its rightful place and bowed at Asahi.

“I’m incredibly grateful for what you’ve done,” she said.

“Just be sure to not lose it again, especially considering how much you care about it,” Asahi replied.

Right when he was about to leave, though, Fuyuka brought him to a halt.

“Why would you go this far for me?”

“I didn’t do much, really. I just happened to stumble across it on my way home, that’s all.”

“Liar,” she replied. Judging by her tone, she wasn’t trying to admonish him, but she also wasn’t content with his explanation.

“I’ve been looking for this for several hours each day and deep into the night. You’ve been searching for it as well, haven’t you?”

“Damn, nothing gets past you,” he answered.

“You never even attempted to hide it, so it’s apparent that I would catch on. I glimpsed you around here during nighttime, as well.”

And here I thought that going a little farther from her usual spot would do the trick. I guess she had me figured out from the beginning.

“Well... I didn’t really have some deep reason to do it or anything like that.”

He wasn’t looking for any sort of compensation when he’d chosen to help her, nor was he trying to “look cool” or play the hero. He’d just wanted to help—nothing more, and nothing less.

“I’ve just been taught growing up to help others when they’re in need. That’s pretty much it,” Asahi replied. He was picturing his rather straightlaced, strict grandfather and his teachings when he answered.

“Parroting your grandfather again?”

“Bingo.”

“This is far from the first time you’ve mentioned his ‘lessons,’ so...” she trailed off with a light smile. Then she spoke up again, “I guess that wasn’t the last time.”

“What d’you mean?”

“The last time you meddled in my business, I mean.”

Asahi forced an awkward smile. It was somewhat tough for him to accept criticism; it made him rather embarrassed.

"You really ought to stay out of other people's business more, by the way," she added.

"Sorry, but that's just how I was raised. At least I'm conscious of how I am."

Fuyuka looked down at the ground, and they both fell into silence. The soft wind fluttered around them, and the sun set on the horizon, staining the scenery in a light amber.

"But, in a way, I think your meddlesome disposition is something that should be valued," she whispered in appreciation.

Unfortunately, Asahi hadn't caught what she'd said. "Did you say something just now, or was that my imagination?" he asked.

"It was your imagination. I didn't say anything." Fuyuka shook her head with her usual poker face.

Is it just me, or does she seem more relaxed and open than usual? Asahi thought to himself as he set out again.

As he took his usual route back, Fuyuka tagging behind him the whole way, Asahi noted that the path that lay ahead of him—although the same one he'd encountered countless times by then—now felt somewhat different.

Chapter Five

A Forced Draw

There have always been two important events that took place at Asahi's school once the second semester began—the first was the cultural festival, which was hosted at the beginning of summer and spanned for two days. Each class would prepare specific events for the festivities. Guests, in turn, were welcome to attend for the allotted time and enjoy the student's efforts. This made it one of the school's grandest events. However, the school's custom had developed and changed over time to the point where it was now widely accepted that the first-years were to take on the majority of the workload, while the second and third-year students were relieved of such responsibilities.

The second notable event was the sports festival. The boys were pitted against each other in softball and soccer competitions, whereas the girls competed in basketball and volleyball. Once the tourneys were finished, each respective victor was awarded a prize. There were also rumors that a special prize would be given to the team MVPs, and that was something everyone highly anticipated. The fervor for the sports festival was palpable—it was a great opportunity for hopeful boys to impress their crushes, and those who belonged to a sports club were excited at the prospect of showing off.

Asahi's class was no different from the rest—the class was in a fever pitch over what was to come. The festivals were an excellent opportunity to blow off some steam.

"Maybe it's just me, but you might wanna try toning your excitement down a notch. I know you're eager to win, but using your face to block the ball isn't exactly what I'd call a pro strat."

"Would you shut it already?"

"You're the one who needs to shut it. Seeing as you've got blood filling your mouth at the moment, I'd say that'd be for the best."

Asahi had suffered an unfortunate accident while his class had been practicing in the lead-up to the sports festival, and he was already regretting choosing Chiaki to escort him to the infirmary. As they walked through the hallways, he mused that it was likely too late to lament his decision. Chiaki,

on the other hand, was oblivious to his friend's regrets and continued to babble on.

"I gotta say, the dude who shot that ball was such a try hard..." Chiaki joked in an attempt to lighten up the mood. It was a bit difficult for Asahi to smile while his nose was steadily bleeding, so all he could offer was a slight curve of his mouth as he pinched his nostrils shut.

The sports festival was to be held in a week on the dot, and so, in PE, everyone made sure to practice the sport they were thinking of competing in. Classes that had PE at the same time made sure to practice together by playing against each other. During their mock competitions, they played in earnest, all the while eagerly anticipating the real confrontation.

In Asahi's case, he and his class had been participating in a mock soccer match. Although this particular sport was by no means Asahi's strong suit, he had managed to coast by... until the end of the first half, that is. That was when the ball had been kicked directly into his face. The one responsible for the shot was a boy from the soccer club. He clearly knew his way around a ball, so the impact had been quite serious. And with all the blood profusely flowing out of Asahi's nose, he had little choice but to go seek immediate medical attention from the infirmary.

"I'm fine from here. You can go back and keep playing. I think halftime's almost over, anyways."

"Oh right—second half's starting soon, huh? Well, be sure to return to us in one piece. I'll be waiting with baited breath."

Way to blow things out of proportion, dude. It's just a nosebleed, Asahi thought to himself.

As he neared the infirmary, though, he began to stagger. He looked down at his hand, realizing it was now stained a deep crimson, and wondered if he'd be able to reach the infirmary before passing out. Eventually, he pulled through and entered the room.

"Is there someone—?"

As soon as he walked in, his eyes widened in surprise. He was expecting to see the nurse—an old lady clad in a white medical coat—but someone else caught his eye first. This someone was a girl with distinctly long, black hair that was partially tied back with a blue ribbon.

"What are you doing here, Himuro?"

"I was injured, just as you were."

Asahi quickly rushed to the sink to rinse the blood from his hand and nose. After he had finished doing so, he turned back to Fuyuka. She was sitting on the infirmary's sofa and firmly applying ice to her right wrist, so it was easy for him to tell where she'd been injured.

"What happened in your case?"

"I sprained my wrist during our class's basketball practice."

That was when Asahi realized that their classes had PE at the same time. While he and the rest of the guys were playing soccer, the girls were obviously participating in their own separate activities.

Fuyuka's wrist was painted with blue bruises. She continued to press the bag of ice against it and occasionally let out a soft groan of pain.

"You've really had your share of bad luck lately, huh?" Asahi noted.

"I can't deny that."

Fainting from an awful fever, losing her cherished ribbon, and now spraining her wrist—Lady Luck clearly wasn't smiling down upon her. She sighed and narrowed her eyes as she looked at him.

"And why are you bleeding from your nose?"

"I happened to catch the ball with my face while we were playing soccer."

"Are you sure I'm the unlucky one here...?" she muttered with a grimace, likely as a result of picturing what he had recently gone through.

Asahi was fairly sure their situations were incomparable—Fuyuka seemed to be in a great deal of pain, and what he had suffered was an entirely different ball game.

"Ah! Some blood is still pooling on the floor!" she exclaimed.

"Shit, I didn't realize it was still going," Asahi cursed, snapping out of his musings. "Where's the nurse?"

"Apparently she was called to the staff room, so it's likely she won't be here for a while."

"Seriously? Well, whatever. I'll just patch myself up," he replied, irritated. He began searching through one of the shelves for some cotton padding to soak up the blood. Despite rummaging around for a while, he was unable to find anything of use.

"*Tch*, where're the damn cotton pads?"

"It's on the shelf located at your lower right side."

"Oh, you're right—there it is. Thanks," Asahi replied. He grabbed what he needed and eventually managed to stop the bleeding. "You sure know the

ins and outs of this place."

"Naturally—I'm a member of the infirmary committee."

"You signed up for that? My condolences."

"Of course not. I was lumped together with the others who didn't want to join and happened to get the short end of the stick." "Oh, I feel that."

At their school, participation in the class committee wasn't compulsory—rather, it was a position that was determined by class consensus. Students elected a few of their own class to become members. It went without saying, but if there happened to be volunteers at the beginning, then there were no issues. Most students were reluctant to join, however, as they considered it to be a waste of time. It detracted from time that could be spent studying or joining a club they were actually interested in. As a result, a majority of the classes had to resort to luck-based games to choose the unfortunate individuals.

"It was all my fault—I *knew* I should've chosen rock," Fuyuka mumbled to herself.

Asahi stared at her and chuckled, to which she responded with a frigid, piercing glare. "You look quite stupid right now. Were you aware of that?" she added, clearly focusing on his cotton-stuffed nose.

"Oh, shut up. I had to stop my nose from recreating the Red Sea," he snapped back.

Fuyuka giggled lightly. Perhaps it was in retaliation for his laughter just moments prior, but in tandem with that, she was also showing him a different side of herself. She didn't seem to care much about letting her guard down at this point—likely due to Asahi having helped her out when she'd dropped her treasured ribbon.

In fact, ever since that incident, she had changed how she composed herself around him. Whenever they crossed paths in their apartment complex, they would exchange greetings. From time to time, they even stopped to chat briefly.

I really wonder why she doesn't act this way around everyone else, though, Asahi puzzled.

She was still as cold and composed as ever when interacting with others, but he received a little of what could be considered preferential treatment. This made him feel that he was considered special to her, even if it was only slightly.

“There you go, ogling my face again. Is there something wrong with it?” she asked in a frigid tone.

“Nothing really, no. Something was just bugging me a little, and I ended up zoning out. That’s all.”

Asahi hadn’t realized that he had been unconsciously staring at her. Despite their improved relationship, he knew that there were certain aspects about her that would likely never change.

“You think you’ll be able to participate next week with your wrist like that?” he wondered as he averted his eyes. He was hoping to change the flow of the conversation before it grew to be too awkward.

“I’m not sure, to be honest,” she answered simply. It was a marked improvement—at least now she didn’t outright ignore him.

“You should probably take the week off either way.”

“I guess so,” she replied with a crestfallen expression. “I hope I can participate next week...”

“And here I expected you to be thrilled. I never pictured you to be the sporty type or someone who liked these kinds of things.”

“I enjoy playing basketball, so...” she trailed off. Her hazelnut eyes seemed mournful.

Asahi had heard rumors that Fuyuka was very adept at the sport. She didn’t attend any particular clubs based around it, but there were still many people who were excited that she was to play at this year’s event.

“Well, here’s to hoping that heals quickly,” Asahi muttered, unable to think of a better or more sensitive reply. He looked at her pained face and immediately rued his lack of tact—it was clear she was suffering both physically and emotionally.

“Thank you,” she replied, then fell silent. This silence soon enveloped the whole room.

Asahi had already managed to stop the bleeding, so there was no longer a reason for him to stay. He turned around and made his way to the door. As he was about to leave, he heard Fuyuka pipe up behind him.

“Take care,” she said. For whatever reason, it caused his stomach to flutter slightly.

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Asahi had received a message from Chiaki urging him to join his friend for some more soccer practice the next day. He was reluctant to do so, however. It wasn't because he disliked sports or anything like that—the weekends were his time of rest, so he wasn't keen on the idea of doing anything strenuous. Since his friend cared so deeply about it, though, he ended up agreeing to his proposition. It would just be one day, after all. It wasn't as if he had anything better to do at his place. If he stayed at home, he would likely just be a couch potato all day. Plus, he figured any sort of training he could get in would be preferable to simply shrugging and saying he was bad at soccer.

And so Asahi spent the entirety of his Saturday practicing soccer with Chiaki.

Chiaki was also a member of the soccer club, so there was an obvious disparity between their skill levels. As Chiaki continuously dribbled the ball, shuffling it around and between his feet, Asahi looked at him and let out an exasperated sigh.

"Weren't we supposed to practice *together* today?" he grumbled.

"Uh, we are practicing right now, aren't we? Check this out," Chiaki replied between dribbling the ball and dodging two guys who futilely attempted to block his path. He ran straight for the goalpost, lining himself up for the perfect shot. Now, the only thing that was in his way was the goalkeeper.

"Take this!" he shouted as he smashed the ball. It flew over the goalkeeper's head and rattled the net behind him. He turned back around to face his friend and added, "We just gotta do it like this, and we'll win. Easy-peasy."

"Um... When I was referring to practice, I meant practicing by *actually playing soccer*—not a video game."

"I mean... just copy whatever the characters are doing, and you should be good, right?"

"You expect me to be able to pull something like that off? Nah, man. Plus, I'm on defense, not offense."

What Chiaki had failed to mention in his text was that this "practice" meeting was to be held at Asahi's house via a soccer video game. Asahi was already suspicious when Chiaki said he would meet him at his apartment, but it wasn't until he'd arrived and brought up the idea of playing video games that Asahi knew his suspicions were absolutely founded.

“Oh well, I don’t really mind playing this, anyways,” Asahi muttered as he shifted his attention back to the television.

The match was already pretty advanced. On one hand, Asahi owned the console, and it had initially given him a slight advantage. On the other hand, Chiaki was the one who owned the game. It was obvious enough from the score that he had played this game before.

“Oof. I’m already three-nil up on you, and we’re only in the first half. At this rate, I’m worried about what’ll happen to you during the real deal, dude,” Chiaki taunted.

“Your concerns would make sense if we were actually playing soccer instead of wasting our time doing this.”

“But this is practice... in a way.”

“If getting better at using my controller is considered ‘practice,’ then you’re definitely on the right track.”

They bickered back and forth, their conversation laced with sarcasm as Chiaki continued to score goal after goal with his overpowered players. At some point, Chiaki stopped being a “tryhard,” but he still wiped the floor with Asahi. He was just too skilled at the game, and Asahi could do little but concede that he had been utterly beaten.

“Oh, right—is the widdle nose-bleeding baby okay now? Does it still hurt?”

“I’m fine now. But if that was you trying to be funny, you gotta do better than that.”

“Apparently, the girls also had all sorts of mishaps during their PE session.”

Upon hearing his friend, Asahi’s grip on the controller inadvertently loosened. This led to Chiaki scoring another goal, giving him a five point lead. At this point, Asahi no longer cared about the score, however—he was far more interested in the new conversation topic. Instead of stewing over his inevitable defeat, he turned to his friend and clarified, “It happened while the girls were practicing basketball. You won’t believe who got injured.”

“Himuro.”

“Right on the money... Wait, you knew?”

“If anything happens to her, news about it spreads around the school right away.”

Asahi only knew about it because of the time they spent together in the infirmary when they were injured, but he'd kept it a secret just in case—Fuyuka already had enough rumors surrounding her as it was. But, as it turned out, due to her status as the fabled "Ice Queen," everyone at school was already aware of her injury by the time the period was over.

"Is it true that she really messed up her dominant hand?" Asahi asked. He figured it would be best to feign ignorance so his friend wouldn't be suspicious of him.

"Yeah, seems like it. I mean, her wrist was completely bandaged up, so she definitely screwed it up pretty bad," Chiaki answered.

"Is there any chance she can take part in the Sports Festival?"

"I don't think so. It sucks for her, but I'm almost positive that injury won't be completely healed in a week."

Chiaki was right, and there was also the fact that her recovery would take longer than usual because of her circumstances—like Asahi, she was living alone in her apartment. It would be virtually impossible to perform household chores and the like without using her dominant hand, so she wouldn't be able to rest it. It was certainly a difficult situation.

Is she gonna be alright? Asahi thought to himself as Chiaki continued to blabber on.

Asahi was more worried about the likelihood that she would be unable to compete versus the injury itself. He recalled her crestfallen face back at the infirmary; it had stuck with him. Even if she was forced to sit out, he knew her well enough to know that—while she'd put on her usual, aloof front—she'd be struggling internally. That was something he was hoping to avoid if possible.

"Okay, that's enough of whooping your ass for the day. According to our promise, you gotta make me some dinner now," Chiaki piped up.

"I never promised that... Wait, let me guess—you just came here so I could cook for you, didn't you?"

"Whoops, you got me. I just felt like eating some of your tasty cooking for a change."

"You're really something, you know that?"

As Chiaki tried to placate his friend, Asahi finally noticed that the match ended 7-0 in Chiaki's favor.

When did he score those two extra goals? he pondered. He still couldn't understand it; he was certainly better at video games. Then again, Chiaki

was better at soccer than he was—was that why he'd defeated him?

"Very well, Jeeves... or should I say, chef Asahi? I require your finest beef stew."

"Beef stew? Do you have any idea how much beef costs?"

"We can split the bill... or I'll just cover it all, okay?! Jeez, dude, don't look at me like that."

Although he lacked some of the ingredients, and the preparations would take some time, it wasn't like the dish was impossible to make. Sure, he pretended to be annoyed, but Asahi was secretly pleased that Chiaki loved his food. That was why he didn't mind indulging his friend whenever he made such requests. It was nice to have someone who enjoyed his cooking, and it provided culinary practice. Plus, it was common courtesy to personally prepare food for one's guests.

"Please, chef Asahi! I beg of you!"

"Hmm, I don't know..."

"I implore you!"

Asahi was just messing with him at this point—he'd had no objections from the start, but his fake hesitation was his way of getting revenge for the humiliating defeat he'd faced in their bout earlier.

"Fine, I guess I don't have a choice."

"Hell yeah!" Chiaki whooped enthusiastically before making a peace sign and doing a little celebratory dance.

With Chiaki goofing off, Asahi contemplated the quickest way to get his hands on some beef. At first, he considered going next door to ask Fuyuka if she could help. He quickly scrapped that idea, though—it would've been too bothersome for her, and he was more than aware of how much he'd meddled into her private affairs up until now.

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Because Asahi lived by himself, he was completely dependent on the monthly allowance he received from his parents. They always sent him enough to ensure he lived a comfortable life—he was never forced to worry about skimping on food or missing out on things he wanted. Still, he was purposefully frugal with his spending as a way to show appreciation for

what his parents did for him. He was always making sure not to splurge on any unnecessary costs.

It was Sunday, the day after Chiaki had come over. Unfortunately, it had been raining cats and dogs all day. That limited his options for the day's groceries—if he bought any sort of meat or vegetables, they'd get wet on the way home and quickly spoil in the refrigerator. He'd have to omit those from his shopping list for the day. That, in addition to the heavy torrent outside, made him reluctant to leave his apartment complex. There was a special sale going on at the supermarket, though, and no way was he letting such an opportunity pass him by.

He grabbed a large umbrella and went outside, resolute in his quest for thriftiness. The deluge thoroughly soaked his shoes and the cuffs of his pants, but not even that could deter him from his journey. He soon happened across a familiar face.

"Hey, what are you doing over there?" he called out.

"Isn't it obvious? I'm sheltering myself from the rain," Fuyuka answered in her usual cold tone.

By the look of things, she had been walking back home from the market and been caught off-guard by the sudden downpour. She was gripping her bag of groceries in her "good" hand and nothing in the other. Even if she had brought an umbrella, Asahi realized her other hand still hadn't improved enough for her to use it. She likely would have ended up in this exact situation regardless.

"You think your wrist will heal up in time?" he asked.

"That would require a miracle."

Judging by her answer, it was as Asahi had feared the day before—she'd been using her injured wrist on a regular basis, seeing as she had no one else at home. The bandaging was fairly loose, allowing for a reasonable amount of mobility. This, regrettably, also made for a longer recovery time.

"You can return with me if you want. I mean, I do have a pretty large umbrella. The rain's going to stop eventually, but you could end up catching another cold if you stay out here."

Asahi knew that if she declined his offer this time, he would have to refrain from insisting. Unfortunately, the forecast had called for heavy rain all day, so his earlier statement wasn't entirely accurate. At any rate, she could easily make her way over to a store and take shelter inside if she was

so averse to joining him, so Asahi wasn't especially concerned about leaving her outside if she did refuse to join him.

"Very well, I'll humor your offer," she assented.

Wait a sec, she accepted? That's unexpected, he thought. "Wow, a straight 'yes'? That's rare coming from you."

"I'd planned to call a taxi as a last resort, so I'd rather avoid that if possible."

"Who do you even think I am?"

"Someone who takes great pleasure meddling in his neighbors' business."

Asahi couldn't really offer a retort—she had hit the nail on the head. If he conceded on that point, he'd be stuck listening to her complaints. It wasn't his fault they happened to live next to each other; that was sheer coincidence. While he could see how he was most likely overstepping boundaries, the truth of the matter was that they were next-door neighbors, and he simply wished to help out in any way he could.

"That doesn't exactly sound like a glowing review," he joked.

"It's not, in case you haven't realized."

So this is the thanks I get for offering to escort her back home? Why'd she even accept if she's just gonna trash talk me the entire time? Not gonna lie, it stings, he complained to himself.

All he could do against her verbal abuse was to smile and nod.

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Once Asahi had bought what he needed, he and Fuyuka exited the supermarket and gazed up at the rainfall. It was still pouring down in thick sheets, and heavy, gray clouds completely blanketed the sky. There wasn't the slightest hint of sunshine present. Needless to say, the rain wouldn't be letting up any time soon.

"Let's just get going," Asahi finally uttered.

"Yes, let's."

As they started to head home, Asahi tried to conjure up a more romantic scenario where he shared an umbrella with Fuyuka in his head. Reality soon brought those images crashing down, though, because the truth of the

matter was that it was quite cumbersome and awkward—he didn't have much room under there to maneuver properly.

"Were you purposefully trying to place me on the right side?" she asked with a piercing gaze.

"Uh, yeah. Your right wrist is still injured, isn't it? I didn't want you to be on the left side—your groceries would get soaked. You got a problem with that?" he answered.

"I've heard that when a man and a woman share an umbrella in this manner, it means they wish for love to bloom between them."

"And you think that's why I offered to help you? Because I wanted to set up that convoluted scenario of yours?"

"No, I don't. I think you were simply looking to stick your nose where it doesn't belong as usual. I doubt you have any feelings for me."

"Then don't just randomly bring up weird shit like that," he grumbled.

Asahi had figured that they'd be walking home in silence, but it wasn't exactly shocking for her to introduce such topics into conversations. It was pretty obvious at this point that her opinion of him wasn't the greatest, to say the least. He was used to her suspecting an ulterior motive whenever he'd tried to help her so far, regardless of his true intentions. Although he had always approached her out of the kindness of his heart, he was painfully aware of how wary she was of him. Still, he couldn't blame her reasoning, as she'd had a fair share of guys who approached her solely because of her attractiveness. She had been partially correct, though—Asahi didn't have any feelings toward her. He had simply offered his umbrella as a gesture of good will, and nothing more.

"You never would've set foot in my place to begin with if you thought I was looking for *more* than just help with studying, so..." he trailed off.

"Indeed. Thank goodness you're simply annoying because you're a good person."

"Yep, that's nice."

"That was quite the automatic response."

"I'm not really a fan of you throwing insults my way, so I just reply without thinking when it happens."

He didn't particularly mind being called annoying due to his kind disposition. Actually, it described him to a T. Plus, getting to have a conversation with Fuyuka more than made up for it.

As they continued home, he started to ponder the reason behind her barrier. Why did she behave so frigidly around others? Did she think others would harm her and used her iciness as a defense mechanism? Perhaps that was going too far, but something had definitely happened in her past that resulted in her current behavior. He couldn't ask her about it, either way—they hadn't grown close enough yet, and all of their exchanges so far had been superficial.

They both remained silent for a while.

Asahi looked over at Fuyuka's hand. Something within him urged to request if he could carry her bags, but she had already denied him once. It would have been wasted effort even if she had accepted anyway, as both his hands were currently occupied with the umbrella and his own groceries.

"Okay. I've got the side dishes, the ready-made meal, and..." Fuyuka mumbled to herself.

"What are you on about?"

"Nothing," she snapped back with an unpleasant expression. Asahi instinctually averted his eyes. She quickly continued, "I've been making my own meals as of late. I was just looking over the items that are necessary to make myself a balanced dinner. Although I always try to mind what I eat, it seems a bit futile considering the state of my hand. Maybe it's pointless to do anything today... or for the near future."

Asahi hadn't even brought up the issue, but she must have felt insecure about her cooking skills if she'd just unloaded so much information at once. She was right, however—it would be nigh-on impossible for her to cook considering the state of her hand.

"Want me to cook for you today, then?" he asked.

"Excuse me?" she answered after a brief pause. Her eyes widened in surprise.

He was aware that he was butting in again, but he couldn't exactly help himself. She would definitely strike down his offer and then remind him of all the times she'd done the exact same thing when he'd stuck his nose where it didn't belong. Before she could get another word in, though, he continued, "I said I could make dinner for you, as well. You said you wanted to have something nice and healthy, didn't you?"

"I did, but..."

"You may have a pouch with a ready-made meal and some microwavable side dishes, but you'd still have to use your main hand to

wash the plates and everything else. If you really wanna participate in next week's event, it'd be best for you to rest your hand as much as possible."

"There you go again with your meddling," she muttered after another pause.

"Yeah," answered Asahi with a nod. This time, his interference wasn't merely out of the kindness of his heart, however.

As much as he enjoyed helping those in need, he knew when to rein himself in and back off. He'd never go to such extremes for anyone else—Fuyuka was the exception. She was intriguing to him. Although she constantly encased herself in an icy shell, it was much thinner than she'd initially let on. Asahi had realized that, after each of their interactions, he was beginning to see cracks forming in that shell. That was enough to compel him to continue helping her... or attempt to, at least. He'd never felt this way about anyone else before.

"I don't know what to say... You never relent in your crusade to assist others, do you?" Fuyuka replied with a sigh, not even bothering to hide her amazement.

"Couldn't have said it better myself," Asahi agreed. Fuyuka didn't quip back in her usual way, though—she cast her eyes down and fell silent.

Asahi wasn't sure why she'd gone quiet all of a sudden, so he waited for some time for her to say something. The only other sound was the soothing shower of rain that surrounded them. His patience was in vain, however, because she did not utter a single word until they arrived at the apartment complex. As they passed through the gate and headed toward their respective rooms, Fuyuka suddenly blurted out, "Very well. If you're fine with it, I'll accept your offer. I do have one condition, however—allow me to pay for my share of the meal, at least."

Her unforeseen acceptance startled Asahi, breaking through the peaceful pattering of the rain.

Chapter Six

What Lies Beneath the Ice

After they'd arranged to have dinner together that evening, Fuyuka headed straight home. She likely needed to put away her groceries and get a few things in order before she returned to Asahi's place. In the meantime, he was left to prepare dinner. By the time she arrived, chances are it would be ready to eat.

The table was soon lined with several attractive dishes: freshly cooked rice, a vibrant plate of stir-fried meat and vegetables, a small portion of lightly-seasoned wakame kelp—just as his parents would make them—and two bowls of tofu-laden miso soup. On their own, they weren't anything to write home about, but together, they were a perfectly hearty and nutritious way to end the day.

Normally, the dining table felt a little too large and formidable for Asahi to sit at alone, but the presence of a guest like Fuyuka helped to make things feel livelier.

"Wow..." Fuyuka gasped as she took in the smorgasbord laid out in front of her with sparkling eyes. For Asahi, who was seated next to her, the meal he'd prepared didn't seem particularly impressive—it was pretty standard fare. The same could not be said for Fuyuka, who keenly went over each and every piece he'd set out. "I'm allowed to eat this?" she asked.

"Yeah, go ahead and eat before it gets cold," he answered.

"Very well, I'll try it," Fuyuka whispered with a tinge of eagerness.

The situation felt quite strange to Asahi. This hadn't been the first time he'd invited her over for dinner, but it still felt like a brand new experience. And although he'd seen plenty of girls smile in his life, Fuyuka's was a rarity that he never grew tired of witnessing.

"It's quite delicious," she remarked after a pause to sample the soup.

"Good to hear."

After the miso soup, Fuyuka went straight for the stir fry. She likely wasn't conscious of it, but Asahi could clearly make out a smile as she eagerly ate his cooking.

The more I look at her, the more I realize how beautiful she really is, he noted.

Indeed, she was grinning so much that it was impossible for him to take his eyes off of her. Normally, she presented herself in a way that gave her an air of maturity and unapproachability. But it seemed as though all it took to shatter that façade and make her act more her age was to serve her a plate of delicious, steaming-hot food.

"Do you intend to make a sport out of staring at my face or something?" she snapped.

"Oh, sorry if that bothered you. It was just nice seeing you happily dig in."

"Well, of course I would. Considering how delicious this meal is, I think it's pretty obvious that I'd act in such a way."

"I'm grateful to hear you say that."

With Asahi's staring very much on her mind, Fuyuka attempted to regain her composure. Unfortunately, her icy demeanor was no match for the warmth of his cooking, and she was unable to hide her joy as she ate.

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"Thanks for the food. It was delectable."

After they'd finished with dinner, Asahi gathered up the plates and took them into the kitchen to wash. He didn't want to take too long with the task—it would only serve to keep his guest waiting, and it was much easier to clean dishes before the food became caked on. Plus, getting it all done immediately made for a clean sink afterward. He normally cleaned up after himself while he cooked, but he hadn't had time to do so that night. The stir fry he'd whipped up had required his complete attention, since it was an easy dish to burn.

"You can go home now if you want. I don't mind," he let her know from the kitchen.

"That would be impolite—coming over simply just to eat your food and then leaving immediately afterward," she replied.

"It's all good. You've already paid me back for the food, so we're even."

"I only did that because it was the natural thing to do. In fact, I'd even assist you with the dishes myself if it wasn't for my injury."

"You wouldn't even be here if your hand was okay."

“You’re not wrong,” she admitted after a pause.

She had no plans to leave until he’d finished the dishes, so she moved to the living room and sat down on the sofa closest to the kitchen. Once she’d made herself comfortable, she pulled out the romance novel she typically carried around with her. Although Asahi already knew from the gossip he’d heard at school that she enjoyed reading this genre, he was still slightly taken aback when he caught a glimpse of the cover and title. No doubt his classmates had also been surprised when they’d first found out.

“So this is where you got that whole umbrella idea from?” he asked.

“Indeed. Is there something you’d like to say?” she responded tersely.

“Well, it’s just that... you know... seeing “The Ice Queen” reading sappy romance novels i—wait, shit.”

Upon the mention of her nickname, her body tensed up, and he quickly regretted ever opening his mouth. He’d just wanted to strike up a lighthearted conversation, to find out more about her. Unfortunately, in his well-meaning attempt, he hadn’t chosen his words wisely.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that,” he quickly apologized.

“I don’t mind. I’m well aware of how I’m referred to at school,” she said with a slight shake of her head. In contrast to her trying to downplay the situation, her tone was incredibly cold and distant. It was a case of reaping what you sow—Fuyuka’s frigid, stand-offish nature had resulted in her being given the name, but it was obvious she didn’t appreciate the moniker in the slightest. Suddenly, she spoke up again, “You shouldn’t worry too much. I don’t think badly of you at all. You’re nothing more than a helpful—if not irksome—pest who happens to live next door to me.”

“Uh... how does that relate to what I said earlier? “

“As I said, I don’t really mind being called that. It describes me well, after all.”

Fuyuka tried to shrug the comment off while Asahi floundered. Given that she’d reverted back to her usual, frigid façade she donned at school, Asahi was right to regret his choice of words. He should’ve thought before he opened his mouth.

Guess there’s still a long way to go before I gain her trust, he noted. Then he turned to her and mentioned, “Uh, I actually have a question for you... if it’s okay with you, that is.”

“Just ask. I don’t understand why you’re always so worried about whether I mind or not.”

“I was just wondering why you’re so okay with spending time with me, even though you’re so dedicated to staying away from everyone else at school.”

“It’s not like I intended for this to happen. You’re the one who keep—”

“Oh, right. It’s just me and my annoying ass, got it,” he muttered as he recalled one of their earlier exchanges. She’d distinctly instructed him to leave her be that one time she’d collapsed from her fever. He was the one who’d chosen to ignore her wishes and nurse her back to health at his place—that had been the beginning of everything.

“Um, I’m sorry for being a pain, I guess,” he said feebly.

“I don’t see any need for you to apologize.”

“Really now? Haven’t I been, in your words, a ‘nuisance’?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth—I never said that. You’re the one who did.”

Asahi knew all too well that he’d stepped out of line several times up until now, and this was no exception. Just because she had accepted his dinner invitation—something he already hadn’t expected—didn’t mean she would magically turn into the talkative sort. He felt a pang of guilt, pushing her like this, but this was just how he was. Just as she didn’t enjoy idle talk, he couldn’t really prevent himself from butting in.

In the end, it was up to Fuyuka to decide whether she considered his nature to be a pro or a con. So far, based on what she’d said earlier, it seemed to be the latter.

“I wouldn’t say that you’re a ‘nuisance.’ In fact, I’m quite indebted to you. You’ve been, well... you’ve been a great help. Let’s just put it that way,” she muttered while hiding her face from Asahi.

Asahi had just finished doing the dishes as she said that. As he was walking out of the kitchen, Fuyuka dashed past him and headed straight for the front door. While he wasn’t able to see her face too clearly, he could make out the red tinge on her cheeks.

“I’ll be going home now. I appreciate you making dinner for me today,” she blurted out.

“Oh, er, sure.”

Bam!

She slammed the door behind her with more force than was necessary. Shortly thereafter, silence returned to the room.

That had been the first time she'd expressed her feelings so openly, and Asahi was left completely flabbergasted by it.

Chapter Seven

Lunch Box

"Hey, Asahi! Chii told me you cooked for him the other day! Is that true?!"

The morning classes had come and gone, and Asahi was about to dig in to his lunch box when Hinami burst into his class with her typical enthusiasm. It was unusual that she had come to talk to him herself, to say the least—she normally spent the lunch period flirting with Chiaki.

"Yeah, I did. Something wrong with that?"

"Yeah, there're tons of things wrong with that! God, did you ever stop to think about what you did?!"

Whenever she acted in this way, Asahi knew that whatever she was hung up about would be far beyond his realm of understanding. He turned to his friend, who was obviously feigning obliviousness while opening his own lunch box.

"Uh, yeah," Chiaki finally sputtered. "Apparently now she's all hell-bent on making my lunch for the upcoming competition."

"And how is that my fault, exactly? I don't see how I'm the bad guy here," Asahi responded.

"You just don't get the intricacies of a maiden's heart, do you? *Sigh*. Girls *hate* it when their boyfriends compare their cooking to others'."

"This would all make sense if you'd compared her cooking to your ex's or your mom's, but why me?"

"Hinami's gonna take it the wrong way no matter who it is. But I just can't help it—the beef stew you made was out-of-this-world good. My mouth's watering just from remembering it."

On one hand, Asahi was happy that he'd praised his food. On the other hand, though, Chiaki was merely adding fuel to the already raging fire.

Hinami was glaring at both of them and quickly spat out, "You're just good at it because your parents are chefs or whatever—that's cheating! I bet Chii considers my cooking absolute trash next to yours now. He probably doesn't even want me to prepare him lunch anymore because of you!"

"Hey, don't put words in my mouth. I never said your food was bad," Chiaki interjected.

"Yeah right. Show me your box, Asahi—I wanna see what you've got."

“It’s nothing special. I just ended up packing last night’s leftovers. Look for yourself—you can try some, if you want,” Asahi said plainly. He opened the lid, revealing the remnants of the stir fry he’d prepared the previous night. Tears immediately formed in Hinami’s eyes upon seeing it.

Chiaki was aware that Asahi wouldn’t lend Hinami his chopsticks to sample the food, so he swiftly picked up his own pair, grabbed a portion of the stir fry, and placed it in Hinami’s mouth. Asahi quickly noticed their classmates’ reactions to the scene—the boys were audibly sighing, and the girls’ voices only increased in volume as they gossiped. He was already quite used to third wheeling when he was around the couple, but they weren’t the type to show public displays of affection in the classroom itself. It made for quite the spectacle.

“So what do you think?” Asahi asked.

“I-It’s good, okay? But...” Hinami muttered.

“I told you it wasn’t anything special.”

“Yeah. It’s good, but that’s pretty much it.”

“What did I say? You blew my cooking skills way out of proportion.”

Hinami had always considered Asahi’s cooking as untouchable because her boyfriend was constantly singing its praises. That, in combination with her gullible personality, allowed her imagination to run wild—she had some preconceived notion that Asahi was some sort of super chef due to his upbringing. It had caused some sparks between them before this moment, as well, but, fortunately, this misunderstanding was instantly resolved the moment his food had touched her tongue.

“So, um... can I still make you lunch for the competition, Chii?” Hinami asked meekly.

“Yeah, I’d love that. Not really sure why you’re asking permission in the first place, though,” he answered.

“R-Really? Even if my cooking’s not as good as Asahi’s?”

“Of course. His food’s good and all, but your cooking will always be number one in my heart,” Chiaki replied. He paused for a second—as if to piece together his next words—and finally declared, “After all, what *really* matters is the love you put into it, not the taste.”

The room instantly fell silent. The boys were pissed at being within earshot of the world’s cheesiest line in existence, and Asahi was simply trying to mind his own business. He let out a heavy sigh; he’d already gotten used to being the odd man out and all, but he didn’t especially

appreciate being treated as the villain in their juvenile lovey-dovey routine. Though he normally bit his tongue and did his best to bear it, there were certain things he just couldn't let slide.

"Um... Sorry about all that, Asahi," Hinami finally told him.

"It's okay; I don't really mind. Question for Chiaki, though—were you talking about my food when you said that? Do you really think love is more important than how it tastes?" Asahi asked, turning to his friend.

"Hm... Lemme think about it, and I'll get back to you later."

"Playing dumb ain't gonna get you out of this one. Fine, whatever, I'm out. From now on, Hinami can do all the cooking for you."

"Come on, dude! Don't be like that! Please, O great chef Asahi, be merciful!" Chiaki pleaded desperately.

Seeing such a sudden change in his attitude and his panic left Hinami and Asahi in peals of laughter.

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The doorbell rang exactly at the appointed time. Just as they'd promised earlier, Fuyuka arrived at Asahi's place for dinner.

"Sorry to intrude like this," she said as she walked past him.

I'll never get used to seeing her at my place, he mused to himself.

"Here. This is compensation for yesterday's dinner," she said brusquely as she thrusted a white envelope toward him.

"Oh, right," he answered somewhat absentmindedly as he received it.

There were only four days left until Friday—the day the sports festival was to take place. Fuyuka and Asahi had agreed that, during this short amount of time, she would come over to have dinner with him. She had insisted on a strict set of guidelines first, though: the first was that she would be the one to pay for both the ingredients and the amount of time Asahi spent preparing their dinner. The second was that she would arrive just prior to dinner and only leave after he'd finished cleaning the dishes—she didn't want to appear as though she was only visiting for the food.

Asahi had managed to change the first rule slightly after some convincing. She had initially been dead set on paying for everything, but he'd managed to convince her to only pay for her half. He'd be eating as well, after all. Unfortunately, he wasn't as successful on waiving the extra

money she gave him for the labor. He was reluctant to accept it—it wasn't much tougher to prepare food for one more, but she had refused to budge after a long argument.

As for the second rule... Fuyuka was intent on watching him cook and staying until the dishes were taken care of after dinner. He figured it must be some sort of personal rule that she was steadfast in abiding by, and—much like the first rule—trying to debate her on it would make little headway.

"Looks like you've already begun with the meal preparations. Can I help you with anything?" she asked.

"I'm good. Even if there was, there's no chance I'd let you. You can't use your hand, remember? That's the whole reason I'm doing this."

"I may not be able to use my right hand, but I can still use my left one."

"Would you stop being so stubborn? Just wait in the living room till I'm done. I'd prefer it if you didn't use your hands at all."

One of Fuyuka's good traits was that she would agree with his decisions if he provided her with a sound argument. She nodded, headed to the living room, and pulled out the same romance novel she'd been reading for a while now. A short time later, however, she changed her mind and returned to the kitchen.

"What is it now?" he asked in a slightly exasperated tone.

"I'd rather watch you cook, if you don't mind."

"Uh... nah, I don't really mind. But—"

"Then I'll stay out of your way. Don't mind me."

He couldn't think of a retort, so he finally conceded and allowed her to spectate. He'd never really understood the appeal of watching someone else cook, but he bit his tongue. True to her word, Fuyuka made herself as small as possible in the kitchen. After a while, he all but completely forgot that she was there in the first place as he devoted his focus to the dishes for the evening. Dinner was grilled salmon, meat and potato stew, and a few Japanese staples for side dishes. He began by peeling and dicing vegetables into even, bite-sized chunks. Fuyuka watched as he skillfully brandished the knife and noted, "Ah, so that's how you're supposed to use it. Very interesting."

"Huh? What other ways did you think you could use a knife?" he replied.

“I was under the impression that you’d need to grip it with both hands,” she explained after an awkward pause.

“What are you, some kind of swordsman? That’s actually a dangerous way of handling it, so I wouldn’t recommend it,” he quipped.

“But don’t you need to summon all of your strength whenever you cut things? Therefore, wouldn’t using both hands be the optimal way to get the best results?”

“Well, be sure to position your hands like *this* at the very least. That’s so you don’t get injured when you do it.”

Asahi was already aware of her lack of culinary experience, but her remark really showed him that her situation was worse than he’d initially thought. He decided he should teach her at least some of the basics to prevent future disaster. Still, despite her seemingly obvious questions, Asahi would never laugh at her lack of knowledge.

“Okay, check this out—you gotta make sure you oil your pan before you cook anything,” he demonstrated to her.

“Why is that?”

“So the food doesn’t stick to the pan.”

“And why would that be so bad?” she asked.

“The food’s more prone to burning if that happens. Plus, it locks the moisture in the food—that’ll make your dish taste better. ”

“I see...”

“Although I’ve seen some new no-stick pans made out of special teflon recently. They don’t need as much oil to get the same results. Actually, some don’t even need oil at all,” Asahi continued to explain as he prepared dinner.

Fuyuka was completely immersed in his impromptu lesson. She listened to his every word and studied his every move. Unlike in the past, where she had been quite skeptical of his help, this time she fully accepted his tips.

Good thing she isn’t staring holes into me for once...

Fuyuka had always been a no-nonsense, straight-to-the-point type of person. If she found his rambling about cooking to be boring or pointless, she would have no trouble telling him to shut up. The fact that she hadn’t yet clearly showed that she had interest in the topic. Asahi didn’t blame her —although one could easily survive off of takeout and ready-made convenience meals, having some cooking skills under one’s belt was still a

good idea. Preparing fresh food at home every now and then was a nice break from the heaps of processed junk.

"This white part here tastes really bitter, so you should always remove it before you start. Otherwise, it'll spoil the taste," he informed her.

"This sounds like something that'd take a fair amount of time and skill to do. How long does it usually take for you?"

"Like 10 to 15 minutes maybe? Depends on how high the heat on the pan is and all the other stuff you need to get ready. I guess if you're not used to the whole process, it'd be somewhat difficult to grasp how much time you'd really need," he responded. He also felt the need to stress the importance of having a hot pan when cooking, so he went off on a slight tangent.

Fuyuka, for her part, took in his every word with intense concentration. After he'd finished his explanation, she seemed to be deliberating about something in her head. "Hm... Based on that, I think I'd take around 40 minutes to do everything... I can't imagine a meat stew would be the best of dishes to make for a lunch box, though," she mumbled, mostly under her breath.

"You say something?"

"I said that I wanted to make lunch for myself, but I'm unsure if your meat stew recipe would properly fit in my lunch box."

Asahi didn't bother to hide his surprise this time as he gawked. "You? A boxed lunch?"

"Perhaps I was just hearing things, but it seemed you were being incredibly rude to me just now," she snapped.

"I didn't mean it in a bad way or anything, just—"

Before he could continue, Fuyuka turned her face away and promptly cut him off. "It's not as if I *want* to do this, but I don't have much of a choice—apparently, the cafeteria isn't going to be open during the sports festival."

"And how, exactly, do you intend to prepare it? Surely not with your right hand."

"With my left hand, as if it wasn't obvious."

"Fat chance. This is the second time I'm telling you to take it easy on your hands. That's why I'm cooking for you, remember?" he chided as he placed the salmon fillets over the grill. "I'll just make you lunch for that

day. We'll consider it the last time I cook for you. I won't be taking no for an answer, by the way."

"Are you sure about that?" she asked after a brief pause.

"Yeah, I am. Just say yes. You know I don't bite."

As she had before, she yielded when presented with solid reasoning. Still, he couldn't help but wonder why she was still so dead set on trying to do everything by herself first. There was still a long and winding road ahead of him when it came to fully gaining her trust, but he was sure he was inching ever closer to doing so.

So I'm gonna be making her lunch, huh? Who would've thought that we'd end up like those dorks Chiaki and Hinami... he thought to himself as he reminisced about the interaction he'd had with them that morning. Although the intent behind the meals was worlds apart in each case, it was essentially based around the same core concept—making food for someone else.

As he continued to prepare the night's miso soup and other dishes, he pondered his options for her future lunch.

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"Asahi, Hina told me the other day that she wants to visit your place sometime. You mind if—?"

"Never in a million years."

Chiaki sighed, and Hinami—who was stuck to his side—let out a small groan. Recently, the two had been spending almost all of their lunch period and afternoons together... along with Asahi, of course. Although Asahi did tend to hang out with them, the three of them were together far more often than usual as of late. Plus, the two lovebirds were being particularly irritating that day.

"Why d'you have to be so blunt about it? I just wanna see your place. That's all," Hinami protested.

"Yeah man, c'mon. You're fine with me coming over, so what difference does it make if she tags along?" Chiaki added.

"I'd rather not have you two acting like Romeo and Juliet and start spouting cheesy lines in my house if I can avoid it," Asahi snapped.

"Wait, we can't be lovey-dovey there?"

“Of course you can’t. I’d rather kill myself.”

“What do you *meaaaan*?” Chiaki whined.

Asahi didn’t bother to reply to his friend’s protests. He knew Chiaki wouldn’t really understand his reasoning anyway. For him, his own home was a sacred place, his personal haven to relax and escape from the world. Although he was accustomed to seeing his friends hug and kiss at Chiaki’s place, they clearly weren’t aware that that sort of behavior would be an unwelcome nuisance in any other person’s home.

I’d rather experience hell itself than have them suck face in my living room, to be honest.

“Okay, then what if I come over without Chii?” Hinami asked.

“Uh, no? Hey, Mr. Boyfriend, please say something,” Asahi replied, turning to his friend for help.

“Why can’t she? You’re not making sense right now,” Chiaki—contrary to what Asahi was looking for—added.

“Dude, she’d be going to a guy’s place without you... Hello, that not ringing any alarms for you?”

Asahi tried to refuse them multiple times, but it soon became clear that neither of them understood the issue with a girl—one who was already in a relationship, no less—visiting his place by herself. Hinami continued to pester Asahi, and Chiaki stubbornly and naively backed her up. Hinami’s obliviousness to the situation was bad enough without her boyfriend doubling down simply for the sake of supporting her and to watch Asahi squirm with discomfort. It also became apparent to Asahi that neither of them were willing to back down on the issue.

“What do you even wanna do at my place, anyways?” he protested. “There isn’t much to do besides playing games, and you don’t exactly strike me as the gaming type. Wait... don’t tell me that you just want to come over to eat?”

“Ding ding ding! We have a winner! Exactly, I wanna try your cooking!” she exclaimed cheerfully.

“Didn’t you already do that the other day?”

“But those were just some reheated leftovers! I want a taste of the real deal. Something fresh, something fancy—like that beef stew Chii’s always raving about! The good stuff!”

“Well, at least you’re honest...” Asahi grumbled.

“Please, chef Asahi! I’m practically on my knees here!” Chiaki shouted out. He gave Asahi such an earnest look that his friend found it impossible to refuse. Asahi’s hesitation was primarily because he didn’t want to see them clinging to each other; he didn’t particularly mind the idea of having Hinami around or cooking for the three of them.

“Okay,” Asahi sighed. “But if you two start getting up to any funny business, I’m kicking you out.”

“Does that mean I can come?!” Hinami asked eagerly.

“Sure.”

“Nice! I did it, Chii! He said yes!”

“That’s great, Hina! I know you’ve been dying to try his cooking for a while now. I’m so happy for you!” Chiaki applauded.

Hinami struck a few silly victory poses. Seeing her radiant smile was rather refreshing, but Asahi’s mood was slightly dampened when he realized what he’d brought upon himself. He wasn’t too confident she understood the no PDA rule, or if she could even uphold it.

“It’s decided, then! If I get the MVP award tomorrow, I’ll be sure to give it to you!” Hinami suddenly blurted out.

“Uh, no thanks. You know the school would get flooded by rumors if you did,” he declined.

“Oh yeah—you’re supposed to give the prize to whoever you have feelings for or something, right?”

The MVP award had been a hot topic at their school recently—especially among the girls. Given Hinami’s explanation, it didn’t take a genius to figure out why. In fact, the gossip surrounding the coveted award had reached such a fever pitch that even “The Ice Queen” was ignored.

The award itself was a brooch with three roses delicately engraved inside. Because of the romantic symbolism of said flowers, the student population considered presenting the brooch to another to be a declaration of love.

“I’m already going out with Chii, so who cares if I pawn it off on you. You could even take the opportunity and hand it to someone else who catches your eye—see if you get lucky,” Hinami joked.

“Oh, okay. Not like I care much about any rumors or some silly urban legend about romance in the first place,” Asahi said flippantly.

“Damn dude, that’s harsh. You'd make a lot of girls cry if they heard you saying that kind of stuff,” Chiaki warned.

“You should listen to him, you know. How d’you expect to be popular with the ladies otherwise?” Hinami added.

“Oh piss off, you two.”

In Asahi’s eyes, it was just an award tied to a tangle of rumors—rumors that he didn’t care even the slightest about. Although his friends felt he was being harsh, he was right from a logical standpoint.

“Are you even sure you’ll be able to nab the prize, Hina? I heard that there’s going to be a lot of competition in the basketball competition,” Asahi added, hoping to change the topic slightly.

“Hmm, I think so. Normally Himuro would be a serious problem, but seeing as she’s injured, I’m not that worried overall.”

“Is Himuro really that good?” he asked incredulously.

“I’m not exactly sure, but she apparently wiped the floor with the school’s basketball team,” Hinami answered.

“Damn. Considering you’re nationally renowned, the fact that you’re scared of her really says something.”

“Correction—I *was* nationally renowned!” she retorted.

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever.”

In her childhood, Hinami excelled at the sport. She was a part of a basketball team that competed on the national level and eventually grew to be a pretty prominent figure. Asahi thought she and Chiaki—who was quite skilled at soccer in his own right—were squandering their potential by not joining any sports clubs in high school. They had their reasons, though, so he’d never really pushed the issue.

“You better look forward to tomorrow, Asahi! I’m gonna bust my ass just for you!” Hinami exclaimed.

“In that case, I’m gonna give it everything I’ve got too! That way, we have a better chance of giving him the prize,” Chiaki added enthusiastically.

“I’m glad the two of you are so hyped about all this, but you don’t really need to try that hard for me,” Asahi grumbled. He knew that they weren’t joking—they genuinely would “bust their asses” to earn the MVP award just so they could hand it off to him. But what would happen if they both managed to win it? It would be strange to accept two brooches, not to mention it would be wasted on someone like him. His mind was wandering at this point, and he suddenly recalled something that Hinami had just uttered.

Hm, they really consider Himuro to be out of the competition...

He'd also overheard the other girls in his class chatting earlier about how they finally had a chance at the award now that Fuyuka was no longer in the competition, so it was clear that everyone had written her off.

"I wonder if she'll be able to make it..." he muttered to himself.

"What're you talking about?" Chiaki, who'd managed to catch what his friend had whispered, asked.

"Oh, it's nothing. Just ignore me," he answered as he packed up the remainder of his lunch and shoved it back into his bag.

Chapter Eight

The Sports Festival

The day of the sports festival had finally arrived.

Asahi was greeted that morning by the chirping of birds and the sudden sharp buzzing of the intercom. He knew who it was, as they'd made arrangements just the other day to walk to school together, but he was still irritated at having been roused from his peaceful sleep.

"Good morning," Fuyuka said as soon as he opened the door to greet her. She was already dressed in her school uniform.

"Yeah, hi. *Yaaawn*..."

Although they were talking on a daily basis by this point, it was still a novel experience to greet each other so early in the morning. And it was even more strange to see her enter his apartment without a hint of reservation.

"So you actually came, huh? And at the crack of dawn, too..." Asahi mumbled.

"Why wouldn't I follow up on my word?"

Asahi noticed that, despite her best efforts to hide it, she wasn't entirely awake herself. The drowsiness in her eyes was a dead giveaway, which belied her prim and prepared appearance.

She could've just slept in a bit more instead of making us both wake up this early, but it's too late now, I guess, he thought to himself. What was done was done; his only option now was to get ready for school as Fuyuka had. It was unlikely she would take "no"—or "five more minutes"—for an answer, after all.

The night before, Asahi had offered to make her a boxed lunch. He had planned on waking up early to prepare their meals to take to school that day. Fuyuka was insistent on being present, as well. She refused to have him wake up early alone merely for her sake. She would keep him company as he prepared the food, then they would go to school together.

"You can't enter the kitchen today, though," Asahi stated.

"Why not?"

"It would ruin the surprise if you see what I'm making, so yeah."

"Er... alright. If that's what you want."

"Yep. Sorry about that."

Although Fuyuka would've normally been quick to complain about this decision, she was still half asleep and headed straight for the sofa. There wouldn't be any cooking lessons that morning.

Once Asahi was sure that Fuyuka wouldn't move from the living room, he started to prepare the meal. His typical lunch would consist of the previous night's leftovers, but this time, he was preparing a meal for two, and he was quite excited about the dish he was planning to make.

He started with karaage—fried chicken. First, he coated the tender pieces in corn starch. Then he dropped them in hot oil to deep fry them. The tantalizing sizzling grabbed Fuyuka's attention, and she turned her head toward the kitchen to see what he was up to.

"Uh-uh-uh, no peeking," he chided.

"*Tch*."

Once he'd finished with the chicken, he started on the next dish. He peeled and cleaned a handful of potatoes, heated them in a pan, mashed them, added thin slices of carrots and cucumber, and added seasoning to everything. It had taken him a while, but the potato salad was finally complete.

"You're taking an awfully long time today," Fuyuka noted after an hour had passed.

"Just a little longer. I'll be done soon."

Fuyuka didn't reply, instead turning her attention back to the novel she was reading.

He placed a bed of white rice on the bottom of their lunch boxes to give it an additional layer. In addition to the chicken and the potato salad, he added a slew of colorful vegetables—such as broccoli and tomatoes—as a garnish. And, to polish it off, he cracked a couple of eggs into a bowl with one hand and beat them with the chopsticks he held in the other.

Fuyuka yawned loudly and quickly covered her mouth with her hand. That was when Asahi noticed that her right wrist was no longer covered by the plaster—it had completely healed.

"I'm glad you managed to recover in time," Asahi said.

"It's all thanks to you."

"All I did was cook for you for a few days. I don't see how that has anything to do with it."

"I think it's fairly obvious to deduce why—you've helped to lessen my burden. The fewer chores I have to do, the more rapid my recovery is."

“If you say so. It wasn’t a big deal, though.”

“There’s no need for you to be modest. I’ll be able to participate in the festival today because of you. Thank you.”

Having her being so honest with her feelings always threw him for a loop, and this instance was no exception. He silently focused on finishing the omelet in an effort to calm himself. If Chiaki or Hinami—people who were far more outgoing than him—were present, they likely would’ve known what to say in this scenario. Asahi was quite flustered, however, and floundered as he tried desperately to think of a suitable response. Finally, he managed to get out, “Well, here’s to hoping you win.”

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t come to my match to support me,” she replied flatly.

“Chill, I ain’t actually going. Besides, I don’t even have a cheerleader outfit on hand.”

Asahi knew full well that attending her match would do nothing more than bring unwanted attention to the two of them, especially if his peers knew he was only there to cheer on “The Ice Queen.”

“There, all done,” he said.

“So is the kitchen no longer off-limits?”

“Nah, there’s no need. Just take the box,” Asahi said as he placed her lunch on the counter separating the kitchen and the living room.

“It’s still quite hot,” she remarked.

“Obviously it would be. I just finished making it, after all. It’s one of those special containers that retains heat, so it should still be warm even by lunchtime.”

“And you’re okay with giving me this?”

“It’s no biggie, really. You can buy these for dirt cheap at any supermarket.”

Fuyuka eagerly inspected the box from every possible angle, peeking through the gaps in the box’s wrapping in an attempt to decipher its succulent contents.

“See? I told you it’d be better as a surprise.”

“Indeed. You were right.”

“Nice to hear you say that. Still, don’t expect too much—I wouldn’t call it anything special.”

He had made sure to include dishes that he knew she liked to avoid any issues arising. He’d also really gone the extra mile despite downplaying his

efforts, as the lunch he'd prepared was way better than anything he'd ever make for himself.

She placed her lunch box in her bag and headed toward the entrance. Asahi tagged along close behind her.

"I'll be sure to clean the container and give it back to you after," she said.

"It's okay if you don't wash it, honestly," he replied.

"No, I'll make sure to clean it. My hand and wrist have healed now, so there's no need for you to pamper me anymore," she assured him. She rotated and twisted her wrist slightly to demonstrate that she wasn't in pain anymore. It was an indication that things would soon return to normal for her, and that also meant dinner visits would soon become a distant memory.

"Alrighty then. So I can expect to see it sparkling clean when you return it, right?" he joked.

"Of course. You can expect nothing less."

Asahi was no longer worried about her hand, but he was still concerned about how she'd fare in general. Although he'd managed to give her a few cooking lessons, he wasn't entirely confident that she'd be capable of making a proper meal on her own just yet. That and the sad state of affairs the first time she'd washed dishes at his place made him believe that she still had a long way to go. Still, if she thought she could handle her own affairs, then he wouldn't intrude any further. Her wrist was better now, and he felt at ease—still, why did his chest tighten at the realization that she would no longer be coming over for dinner?

"Best of luck with your basketball match," Asahi muttered.

"And I wish you luck in your soccer match. You're playing... defense, wasn't it?" Fuyuka replied as she opened the door.

"Damn, you still remember that? Pretty sure I just mentioned that off-hand last week, didn't I?"

"I have a good memory," she replied. There was a pause, then she loudly stammered, "I-I'll be supporting you, too." The door slammed loudly behind her as she exited.

Asahi was under the impression that their relationship had stagnated recently. It was true that she had visited each night, but most of their conversations had gone no further than trivial small talk. She had just proved him wrong with her little proclamation. This, and his

disappointment that they would no longer be meeting up to eat dinner, sent his mind reeling.

Jeez, I need to stop overthinking things, he thought as he tried to calm himself down. From that point onward, all he could think about was how Fuyuka's beaming smile completely shattered her cold exterior.

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"*Tch*... If only you'd blocked that shot with your face like last time."

"And risk jacking up my nose again? Thanks, but no thanks."

Asahi and Chiaki sat at the edge of the soccer field and watched idly as the team they had lost to began their next match. It was a beautiful, sunny autumn day. The sky was clear and unsullied by clouds—it truly was the perfect day to hold a sports festival.

The soccer and volleyball matches were held in the morning, and softball and basketball tournaments took place in the afternoon. The rules had been simple, but fairly harsh on the losing teams—they were disqualified from playing any more rounds. There were just too many classes at the school and not enough time to organize matches for the losing teams. As a result, the winners were to face each other until only one remained.

"Can't believe we just lost like that," Chiaki grumbled.

"Yeah. It sucks, but that's life."

Asahi's class had been the school's favorite going into the tournament, but they had quickly tasted bitter defeat after their first game. Matchups for the festival were selected at random, and luck hadn't been on their side—their opponent had the soccer club's ace, Yamada Ryuume. He had managed to seize a victory for his team, as well as steal the hearts of all the girls in the audience.

"*Tch*. How unlucky were we to be paired against Ryuume, of all people? And in the first goddamn match! He's just too freakin' good, man," Chiaki complained.

"I don't think you're that different from him in terms of skill," Asahi replied.

"Damn, was that a compliment just now? That's rare coming from you."

“Was it? I’m just stating the facts here... I’m not really trying to praise you or anything.”

“Hey, man! You could’ve at least sprinkled in a little white lie there!”

“I mean, what could you do anyway? Everyone on our team sucked except for you, and it’s not like you can put the whole team on your back. It’s impressive it ended ‘uno-cero’ as it is.”

“I guess you’re righ—wait a sec, did you just say ‘uno-cero’? Didn’t know you were familiar with the lingo.”

“Nah, not really. You’re always rattling off those weird terms when we play Feefa. Just so happened that a few of them stuck.”

Chiaki often used Italian and Spanish terms when he talked about soccer, as he considered them to be the beacon of all things “fútbol.” In this instance, Asahi parroted the score—one -nil—using the “lingo” he’d picked up from his friend.

The two friends continued to chat until the morning proceedings concluded. Asahi’s class was rather gloomy due to having gone winless in everything, but they took solace in the fact that it meant they had free time to do whatever they felt like for the rest of the day. Asahi considered watching the girls in his class as they competed in volleyball—unlike the boys, they had managed to hold out against the other teams. He eventually decided against it, however.

Chiaki’s dream of becoming the MVP had quickly been dashed, so he hung around his friend rather uselessly. “By the way, something’s been bothering you, hasn’t it?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t really know how to explain it... I just have this feeling that something’s up. Back when we were playing, it was like your head was up in the clouds. You were there *physically*, but not in spirit.”

Asahi froze in place. His friend’s intuition had been spot on—he’d been completely out of it during the match. That morning’s events with Fuyuka kept swirling around his head. He couldn’t bring himself to tell Chiaki about that, though, so he simply shook his head. Unfortunately, he couldn’t hide the tinge of red on his cheeks.

“You’re probably imagining things,” he tried to dissuade Chiaki.

“Maybe. I mean, you look and act like you usually do, but...”

Chiaki was rather astute; with enough pushing and prodding, he definitely would have been able to pick up on the reason behind his friend’s

change in behavior. That was why, as much as he wanted to tell him off, Asahi realized it would be best to try feigning innocence.

"There you are, Chii! And Asahi too! Sorry I took so long!" Hinami suddenly shouted from far away as she ran over to the pair.

Perfect timing, Asahi thought. Hopefully, his friend would finally ease up on the questioning.

"Hey, Hina! Are you done with the volleyball match?" Chiaki asked.

"Yep, we're done now. We lost at the semis... what a bummer. I was thinking of having an early lunch, so here I am!"

"Perfect timing. Can we tag along? We're doing jack right now."

"Yeah, we're seriously about to die from boredom here," Asahi added.

"Makes sense, considering you lost your first match."

Once Hinami had arrived, the topic of the conversation had quickly shifted. She showered Chiaki in praise, assuring him that Ryuume was nothing compared to him. Asahi didn't complain—she had been his saving grace from what would have been a rather embarrassing confession.

Usually I don't want anything to do with her, but this might be the first time I'm seriously grateful to see her. Figures, Asahi mused to himself as a wave of relief washed over him.

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"Wait, Hina, you actually made this yourself?" Chiaki asked with a tone of surprise.

"Yep! I even woke up super early to do it!" Hinami replied while puffing out her chest and smirking.

Even Asahi couldn't help but marvel at the lunch box Hinami had prepared for Chiaki that day. It apparently contained all of Chiaki's favorites: sunny-side-up eggs, fried chicken, and a set of tiny hamburger patties. On the side was a generous serving of rice garnished with some nori seaweed that spelled out the word "LOVE."

I definitely can't imagine anything but love being the reason to make this... not without cringing, anyway, Asahi thought to himself.

That was the first time Chiaki's face had lit up all day. Ever since they'd been bested by the would-be victors, led by Ryuume, he hadn't cracked a single of his signature smiles.

“You better dig in before it gets cold! Hurry up and open that mouth! Here comes the airplane!”

“Okay...” Chiaki complied by opening his mouth wide. “Damn, this is *tasty*! This is seriously as good as anything you’d get at a 5-star restaurant.”

“You sure know how to make a pure maiden’s heart skip a beat with your flattery, Chii!”

Asahi was already used to their sappy act. Normally, he would’ve told them to tone it down a bit, but they looked so happy that he ended up holding his tongue. He would’ve preferred to leave them in their own little world and eat alone in peace, but there was no chance either of them would let him off the hook that easily.

“Hey, Master Chef Asahi—you should give this a try,” Chiaki offered.

“I bet it’ll knock your socks off,” Hinami added.

“Would you stop calling me ‘chef Asahi’? It weirds me out.”

They were definitely pressuring him too much, or so he thought—just because his parents were chefs didn’t mean he had an elevated palate when it came to cooking. With great reluctance, he picked up one of the small burger patties and took a bite.

“... Not bad,” he mumbled.

“Nice! He complimented my cooking!” Hinami beamed.

“Atta girl, Hina. It’s not every day that Asahi hands out compliments for free like that. You should’ve seen the look on his face the last time I tried making him some fried rice...”

“Not my fault that it tasted like garbage. If it’s good, I’ll say it’s good; if it’s bad, then I’ll say it’s bad. But yeah, Hinami—your food was good,” Asahi retorted.

What Asahi had failed to mention was that he always took the cook’s feelings into account. When he told Chiaki that his food wasn’t good, he simply left it at that. He didn’t want to hurt his feelings any more than was necessary. And seeing how happy Hinami was when he’d complimented her dish only served to reinforce his beliefs—she was happily bouncing around with a smile on her face and enthusiastically making victory signs.

Asahi’s thoughts then wandered to Fuyuka. *She’s probably trying my lunch right around now too...*

Since the others were already digging into their meals, Asahi proceeded to open his without any hesitation.

“Wow, Asahi—your food looks seriously top-tier today,” Chiaki praised as he leaned over to admire Asahi’s lunch.

“Yeah, it feels like he put in more effort than usual... Don’t tell me that you were trying to compete with mine!” Hinami exclaimed.

“Not at all. I just happened to wake up a little early today, so I killed the extra time by cooking.”

“Oh, I see. That’s probably why you’ve seemed off all day... like you’ve been half asleep, you feel me?” Chiaki mused.

“Maybe? Yeah, you’re probably right. I am feeling really drowsy today,” Asahi replied flippantly as he eyed his food. There was no point in telling the truth.

Although the contents weren’t exactly bursting at the seams with love—like Hinami’s was—it was clear that he put a great deal of care into it, and he was convinced that it would taste good. As he placed a piece of omelet into his mouth, his mind continued to wander. At that very moment, Fuyuka was eating the exact same meal that he was.

I really hope she likes it...

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Once lunch break was over, the festival’s afternoon activities began. In the past, Asahi and Chiaki had gone to support their friends on the other boy’s teams. However, things had recently started to change—little by little, students would show up to support their friends, regardless of their gender. Asahi recalled how, that very morning, several third-year girls had gone to cheer Ryuume on. They had definitely stood out from the crowd with their flashy clothes and bottle-blonde hair.

As for Asahi, he was making his way toward the basketball courts. Just as lunch break had ended, Hinami had blurted out, “I really hope you guys come to cheer for me when I play basketball!” Chiaki, ever the supportive boyfriend, had assured her that he and Asahi would certainly be there.

Not like I had a choice in the first place... Asahi grumbled to himself. At least he wasn’t attending to spur on someone special, unlike the other guys who were there. He felt obligated to do so, especially after Hinami had promised to give him the VIP brooch if she were to achieve victory. Seeing her so spirited and eager to give it her all made it impossible for him to

ignore her. She was doing all of this for him—the least he could do was show up and root for her.

"Hinaaa! Let's go! Give it to 'em! Yeah, well done!" Chiaki cheered. "Asahi, come on! I can't hear you!"

"G-Go Hinami.." Asahi said half-heartedly.

"You sound so depressed it's almost funny! Ah! Nice one, Hina! Hit her with the layup!"

Despite Chiaki shouting his heart out to cheer on his girlfriend, he actually didn't stand out much. The entire crowd was in an uproar, each person supporting their respective team with everything they had. Asahi craned his neck to get a better look of the court and spotted Hinami, the center of attention.

"Okay, Hina, mark her!" one of her teammates commanded.

"I got this!" she replied.

Hinami quickly positioned herself in front of Fuyuka, who was fast approaching with the ball. This wasn't the first time they'd met in a one-versus-one, and it wouldn't be the last—the first half had only just begun. Every time they squared off, the crowd's fervor would only increase in anticipation for their upcoming plays.

Time passed swiftly with all the frenetic activity. Before everyone knew it, only five minutes remained on the clock before the end of the first half.

"You got five more minutes, Hinami! Don't let her score!" Chiaki exclaimed as loudly as possible, trying his best to yell over the crowd.

Hinami tensed up, as if she'd heard Chiaki's encouragement, and prepared to defend her position.

Fuyuka quickly dribbled around her in an attempt to rid herself of Hinami's pressure. Although Hinami quickly closed her down and attempted to block her, she was already in position for the perfect shot. The ball sailed in a flawless arc and flew through the netting with a *swish*. Just as the ball was nearing the ground, the buzzer sounded, indicating the end of the first half.

"Damn, she scored a triple again? How many is that now?" Chiaki asked.

"Like three or four?" Asahi guessed.

"And to think she's not even in the basketball club. I guess the rumors were true—Himuro's just a beast," Chiaki mumbled bitterly. Hinami wasn't looking much better after that shot. Fuyuka's performances had been

outstanding in all of her matches so far, even more so than Hinami's—the supposed national basketball champion. Fuyuka had barely missed any of her shots and had always shaken off her opponents with precision and swiftness. Her deftness impressed both opponents and spectators alike.

"I'll head down to the court and chat with Hina while we wait for the second half," Chiaki said.

"Guess I'll go with you," Asahi replied.

"Glad to hear you want to help me cheer Hina up."

"Nah, I just want to grab myself a drink from the machine."

"Hah, knew it. Okay, dude, see you in a bit."

There were 10 minutes left before the second half would start, so they each had plenty of time to spare. Asahi left the gymnasium, conveniently tuning out Chiaki's cries to bring him a drink, as well.

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The closest vending machine was swarming with people, so Asahi decided to walk a little farther and head toward the main school building. The vending machines there had not a trace of human life around them.

"Oh..."

As he was considering which drink to purchase, he suddenly heard footsteps behind him. He turned around and spotted Fuyuka still sporting her gym attire.

"Not wearing your ribbon today?" he asked.

"I don't normally wear it when I'm exercising," she replied.

"Huh..."

Instead of her usual blue ribbon, she had been wearing a headband of the exact same color during the match. The school handed out these headbands to students as a way to "show solidarity" for the event... or so they claimed. In reality, the colorful accessories served as a way to help everyone differentiate themselves. Each class had its own—Asahi and Chiaki were wearing red, while Hinami was wearing green for her class. However, Fuyuka's headband was different from her classmates'—not to mention that she had worn it in a different way.

"Thank you for the lunch, by the way," she said.

"No problem."

“It was delicious, particularly the omelet. That was my favorite.”

“Huh, okay,” Asahi muttered as he turned around to face the machine again.

“Is something wrong?” Fuyuka asked while tilting her head in confusion.

“No, it’s nothing.”

Despite trying his best to act normally, she’d managed to see right through him in the same way as Chiaki had earlier.

What the hell’s wrong with me? I got so excited when she praised my cooking that I can’t even look her in the eyes anymore. It’s been this way ever since I saw her smile this morning... Just remembering it is making my head spin. It’s pretty hard not to think about it with her so close to me! I wish I could talk to somebody about how I feel right now, because every time she’s near me, I feel like my heart’s about to jump out of my chest!

After failing to come up with a solid explanation for his behavior as he perused the drinks, he finally settled on getting a bottle of cold tea. He stepped aside to let Fuyuka choose for herself and quickly chugged the contents of the bottle, all the while trying to take his mind off the situation at hand.

After their brief and rather awkward exchange, Asahi knew he had to say something before they headed back—but what to say without coming across as weird? “I gotta say, you’re pretty good at basketball,” he finally managed to get out.

“So you were watching me?”

“Well, yeah. I did say I’d come to support you silently.”

Asahi tried to answer in a way that wouldn’t weird her out, but he couldn’t deny the fact that she *was* one of the reasons he’d joined Chiaki in watching the basketball tourney. Fuyuka didn’t pry any further. She instead sipped at her own sports drink and continued the conversation after a light pause.

“When I was younger, I’d play a lot of basketball with someone else at a park close to my home,” she began somewhat despondently.

One’s childhood could certainly impact one’s direction in life, but she seemed to be rather reluctant to delve into further details. Asahi wasn’t sure if it was just his imagination or not, but she’d sounded gloomy. It was his turn not to pry.

“Well, here’s to hoping you win,” Asahi said, hoping to change the conversation to cheer her up. Just as he’d hoped, her expression cleared up.

“There’s a pretty large discrepancy in terms of points, so I can’t imagine it’ll be easy for us.”

“I’m sure you can catch up fine if you wanted to. Just score a few more of those triples, and—”

“It’s not as simple as you’re making it out to be. I’m playing against several basketball club members, and the girl who is marking me is especially skilled. I’ve managed to slip past her the last few times, but it won’t be so easy in the second half.”

She must be talking about Hinami. No wonder Fuyuka thinks she’s good—Hinami was a national champion at one point, after all.

Going into the second half, the score was 20-28 in Hinami’s team’s favor. For those who weren’t as well-versed in basketball, the match seemed to be close. Those who were familiar with the sport, however, could clearly see the difference in strength and skill between the two classes. It was quite apparent that Fuyuka had realized the disparity, as well—her tell-tale downcast gaze indicated that she had already conceded defeat.

“Himuro, tell me your favorite dish,” Asahi spoke up.

“Why the sudden question?” she asked.

“Just tell me.”

She had wanted to tell him for a split second, but then hesitated. She placed her hand over her mouth and deliberated. Eventually, she answered, “Omelet rice.”

“Okay, got it.”

“Why would you ask me that, though?”

“If you win today’s competition, I’ll cook it for you. I’ll make sure it’s the best you’ll ever taste.”

“What?” she gasped.

“You gotta win now. Better give it your all,” he teased. When no reply came, he explained, “Let’s just say that, uh, I don’t want the other team to win for... certain reasons.”

This time, his offer was based purely on selfishness—if Hinami won the MVP award, she would give her brooch to Asahi. Since that was essentially the same as a declaration of love—despite her true intentions—he wished to avoid the embarrassment and annoyance of the situation altogether. If Fuyuka were to come out victorious, he wouldn’t have to worry about any

of those things. He had another selfish reason too, one that he couldn't tell her—he wanted to see that smile of hers once more.

"So you'll make me an omelet rice if I win?" she asked with a tinge of suspicion in her voice.

"Yeah. Obviously, I know that's not enough of a reason for you to—"

"Deal."

"Wait, you're in?" he asked incredulously.

"You were the one who proposed the idea. Why are you so surprised?"

"Y-You do have a point there."

"I'll give it my all in the second half," Fuyuka declared.

She fished the headband she'd worn earlier out of her pocket, gathered up her long, silky black hair, and used the headband to tie it up into a ponytail.

"You'd better not forget your promise," she warned him with a smile. The sun illuminated her face, making her smile shine even brighter. With that, she turned around and returned to the gym.

Asahi was rooted to the spot. He chugged the remnants of his bottle in an attempt to regain his composure. *Guess I'll also have to give it everything I've got. If she really does win, I'll have to cook my heart out,* Asahi, who was fired up and ready to go, told himself.

Chapter Nine

A Pretty Serious Suggestion

Chiaki and Hinami invited Asahi to have dinner with them after the sports festival had ended. In reality, it was more akin to a pity party for all of the losers. Asahi already had prior arrangements for that night, however, so he politely declined—after all, why would he wallow in his own misery at a consolation party when he could celebrate with the winner instead?

He didn't have to wait long before the guest of honor arrived at his apartment.

"It smells fantastic," she said. The pure delight on her face was obvious as she took in the spread on the table. Adorning it was her favorite dish—omelet rice, perfectly cooked and shimmering in all its golden splendor. "Is this actually for me? This isn't some kind of prank of yours?"

"You bet. I did say I'd treat you properly if you won, remember?" Asahi replied.

"Then let's get to eating."

"Mhmm. I hope you like it. It's freshly made omelet rice. Only the best for Miss MVP herself."

"W-Would you mind not calling me that?" Fuyuka stuttered while blushing. Although she made an attempt to maintain her trademark, dignified "Ice Queen" demeanor, she faltered under such praise.

"But seriously, you were phenomenal back there," he remarked as he recalled the second half of the match. It had been a heated game—Fuyuka had managed to score five triples despite the consistent intense pressure put on her from the opposing team. Asahi couldn't help but chuckle to himself when he recalled Chiaki cheering for his girlfriend like there was no tomorrow. Meanwhile, right beside him, Asahi had wished for the complete opposite.

With Fuyuka leading the roster, her class had been able to turn the tables and made triumphant a comeback befitting of the last game of the tournament.

I feel a bit sorry for what I did to Hinami... but it is what it is, Asahi thought to himself. Although he was relieved Hinami hadn't won the brooch, he didn't exactly feel good about the situation—she'd given it her all on his behalf, after all.

Fuyuka took a bite of the food. “It’s... It’s truly delicious,” she praised his cooking with a smile on her face. Given her stoic nature, Asahi appreciated each rare smile she gave more than anything else.

“Glad you like it. Makes it worth the effort.”

Fuyuka’s expression gradually softened the more she continued to eat. This side of her was just as charming and innocent as her typical distant and elegant side.

She’s letting her guard down around me, even if it’s a little bit, he thought to himself. To have “The Ice Queen” so much as grin was absolutely unthinkable for his classmates, much less engage in normal conversation. Despite her best efforts to construct a frozen wall around herself, however, her stand-offish nature only made her more appealing to her classmates. They were enraptured by her and every little thing she did.

“Damn, you’re really digging in, huh? Want seconds?” he asked as she eagerly scarfed down her meal.

“Do I look like a glutton to you?”

“Nah, that’s not what I meant. Sorry if it came across that way.”

Asahi’s question came from good intentions—he figured that she was hungrier than usual after such a taxing match. Fuyuka didn’t take kindly to his comment, though, as she turned her head away in displeasure.

It was nice for her to come over for dinner of her own volition. This was the first time he felt that she wasn’t merely hanging around him due to unavoidable circumstances.

“You’ve been spacing out for a while now. Your dinner will get cold if you leave it for too long,” Fuyuka chided.

“Ah, sorry. I just had a couple of things on my mind.”

“Must be incredibly important if it’s taking your attention away from eating.”

Asahi wondered if they had gotten closer to each other even if by a very small margin. But it wasn’t something he could open up to her about either way, so he quickly abandoned the thought and began chowing down instead.

The omelet rice had cost a pretty penny to make. The eggs alone were two hundred yen a piece. Items such as meticulously chosen premium chicken, butter, and milk had all hiked the price up further. He had not only confidence in the ingredients he selected, but also in his cooking skills.

He took a spoonful of food and was immediately embraced by a mild sweetness that practically melted in his mouth. The ketchup provided the perfect tangy accent that complimented the rice and showcased the quality of the other ingredients.

Don't wanna sound cocky or anything, but I hit it out of the park with this one, he thought. "This is pretty freakin' good."

"Indeed. That's why you should eat it while it's still warm," she proclaimed, as if she herself were the one who made it. When he looked back over at her, he noticed that she'd already finished half of her plate.

She's getting that down faster than usual, Asahi noted. His mouth curled up in a smile—it wasn't that he found the pace she was eating to be particularly amusing; rather, he was just content in the fact that he was sitting at his table and enjoying a meal with her. He knew that he shouldn't get used to it, though—there would no longer be a reason for them to spend their nights together like this.

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After they had both finished eating, Fuyuka volunteered to do the dishes. Asahi had grown to expect this by now, but he still offered to do it regardless. Fuyuka, ever set in her ways, wordlessly handed him the lunch box. He accepted it with a nod and added, "So you did end up washing the container."

"Of course. I promised to return it to you sparkling clean, after all."

When Asahi opened the box to inspect the interior, he was practically blinded by its radiance. *She wasn't kidding when she said that,* Asahi mused. Suddenly, a terrible thought occurred to him. "Just to make sure... you didn't use bleach on this, did you?"

"No, I didn't. I washed it as you normally would," she assured him.

"'As you normally would'? Uh..."

It wasn't the regular caliber of cleanliness—especially not with Fuyuka's history of subpar dishwashing skills—so he'd figured she'd adopted an unconventional method. She must have gotten drastically better at the task.

That was why she'd handed the box to him silently when he'd offered to do the dishes—it was her response, essentially declaring that she could

handle things on her own from here on out.

“Alrighty then... I guess I’m counting on you for dish-washing duty, Himuro,” Asahi stated.

“Your reluctant tone is absurd at this point. It’s only natural for me to help out—after all, you’re the one who went to the trouble of making me that meal,” she proclaimed with deep resolve. Asahi could only return a forced smile as he followed her back into the kitchen. He wanted to witness her new skills in action.

At first, Fuyuka shot a few disgruntled glances at Asahi. She seemed to remember her blunder the first time she’d taken on the duty, however, because she soon stopped. She put on a pair of rubber gloves—correctly this time—marched over to the sink, and began to wash.

As it turned out, her skills hadn’t improved in the slightest. The basics were ingrained into her, courtesy of all the practice she’d had during the week-long cooking classes she’d received from Asahi, but there was still a lot left to be desired. He had to give her some credit, however—the tableware drying on the rack glistened with the same cleanliness as the lunch box she’d returned to him earlier. It was the sort of bizarre scene that looked contradictory at first glance; in truth, the reason was quite simple—so simple that it made Asahi break into a hearty chuckle. He was ultimately kicked out of the kitchen for laughing, but it didn’t matter at that point. He’d already found his answer, after all.

So how had Fuyuka been able to clean the lunch box so well that it looked good as new? She’d done so until it ended up that way, regardless of how long it took her. Thanks to her rather inefficient mindset, it would take her hours to finish the task at hand. Asahi wanted to point that out, but he chose to refrain in fear of getting on her bad side again.

“I have finished washing the dishes,” she finally announced.

“Good job. Sorry for pushing everything onto you,” he said.

“And I told you that I wanted to do this because—“

“Because I was the one who made everything? That doesn’t matter. I’m just grateful in general. Just let me thank you at the very least,” he cut her off.

Fuyuka frowned, but she didn’t argue the point any further. Her eyes strayed downward—or diagonally, to be more precise—toward the pile of textbooks and notebooks that Asahi was laying out on the table.

“Are you going to study now?” she asked.

“Finals are coming up, so I figured I’d get a head start.”

“That’s an admirable idea... but I’m afraid your answers for problems three and seven are incorrect.”

“Well, you got me there,” he quipped after a brief pause to check the answers in question.

“This one is a simple arithmetic mistake, but the other one is completely inaccurate. You shouldn’t use this formula here, but rather...”

Fuyuka always returned to her residence after she finished with the dishes, but this time, she seated herself next to him. If she was fine with helping him study, then he was more than happy to listen. She never provided any sort of diagrams or formulas when she explained the proper methods to him, but her clear explanations helped him to find the answers he was seeking.

“No wonder you’re at the top of the class. Not even the teachers explain things as good as you do,” he marveled.

“That nonsense again? I couldn’t possibly be more skilled—let alone more qualified—than our teachers.”

“It’s true, though,” he insisted. “Your explanations are the easiest to understand for me, personally. In fact, I wouldn’t mind hiring you as my, uh, private tutor...”

Asahi tried his best to combat Fuyuka’s modesty. He was determined to let her know he wasn’t just spewing empty flattery, perhaps at the expense of taking it too far. Before he knew it, his tongue had slipped, and Fuyuka gazed at him with a degree of skepticism.

“Me? Become your private tutor?”

“Err... well, no... you see...” he stuttered in a panic as he tried to remedy the situation. His mind was drawing a blank, so he eventually decided to tell her the truth. “Well, you know... Remember our midterms? I got good grades thanks to you, and—”

“That was simply a result of your own hard work, wasn’t it? I’m not sure I had anything to do with that...” she replied.

“God, what do I have to say to get it through that stubborn head of yours? I feel like there’s so much I’d be clueless about if I were studying on my own. Your teaching style suits me best—that’s why I think you’d make a great tutor. Ahh, forget I said anything,” he grumbled as he turned his back to her.

Having her assist with his studies was something he'd considered before, but he'd always quickly scrapped the idea because he was certain she would decline. He had her full attention this time, but he wasn't exactly holding his breath. The truth of the matter was that their relationship should have ended as soon as Fuyuka had returned the lunch box to him. The fact that she remained after dinner was a miracle in and of itself, so he couldn't see this becoming a regular occurrence.

When Asahi thought back on it, he realized their relationship had been fickle from the start. It had started a month ago when he'd taken care of her after she'd collapsed from that intense fever. There was always the risk of the relationship severing at a moment's notice, but somehow they'd managed to make it this far. Perhaps that was why he had had such a major slip of the tongue. He knew she would leave for good in a few minutes, so he—unconsciously—wanted to cling desperately to their precious time for just a little while longer. Even if it was as futile as trying to cling on to a fine thread, he wanted an excuse to continue meeting with her.

No response, huh? he thought bitterly to himself before he awkwardly turned back around to face her again. Fuyuka was resting her hand over her mouth, and her eyes were cast downward, as if deep in thought. Asahi had spent enough time with her to know that this was the gesture she made when she was seriously considering something—though he was unaware if Fuyuka was aware of the habit herself.

So you're telling me there's a chance? Asahi marveled as his heart fluttered slightly.

"I don't mind, if you're fine with me. I wouldn't go so far as to be your private tutor, but I have no issue with helping you with your studies," she finally answered.

"For real?"

"Yes, 'for real,'" she replied in a composed manner. Asahi, on the other hand, struggled to keep his eyes in his skull. He'd never expected his wish to be granted, not in a million years.

Her words continued to reverberate in his head. Fuyuka, the infamous "Ice Queen" who rejected everyone and locked her heart away, had genuinely accepted an offer to help Asahi with his homework. In other words, she also was fine with continuing their relationship. He just could not wrap his mind around it.

"Although I do have one condition, if you don't mind," she added.

“Condition? Oh yeah, sure—I don’t mind paying you by the hour if you want,” he replied.

“There’s no need for that,” she waved him off. Her gaze wandered around the room, and she took a deep breath before she finally continued, “I’ll help you with your studies if you teach me how to cook.”

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“It’s not as if I’m a walking disaster in the kitchen, okay? It’s just...” Fuyuka repeated over and over whenever Asahi prodded her. “I would feel ashamed if I kept troubling you like this all the time.”

It appeared as though she’d caught on to his persistent hesitation. “Can’t deny that I’d feel relieved knowing you can make a good meal for yourself. That way, I wouldn’t have to hover over your shoulder the whole time,” Asahi agreed.

“There was never a need for you to be so worried about me to begin with,” she retorted coolly.

“I... well... touché,” he faltered with a wince.

“I was just joking. I know I’ve said this several times now, but I truly am grateful.” Fuyuka’s expression quickly softened. It was still a far cry from one of her genuine smiles that cropped up every so often, but it was gentler than her usual distant countenance. Asahi quite enjoyed this hidden side to her that nobody at school was privy to.

Suddenly, a rather basic question came to his mind. “I know I’m asking this late in the game, but... are you sure you’re okay with coming to my apartment all by yourself?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” she asked.

“Well, you know... because I live alone, and maybe you fear for your safety or something.”

“Are you implying you could be tempted to do something to me?”

“Never. Wouldn’t dream of it,” he stressed. Asahi could easily imagine his life falling apart if he were to do anything drastic to Fuyuka right there. It went without saying that he had no intention of doing so, though. He’d never even considered the thought. “I didn’t pull anything shady when you were sick, right?” he added.

“Perhaps,” she agreed after a slight pause. “But that wasn’t the case when you saved me from collapsing to the floor.”

“How exactly was I supposed to avoid that?” he retorted in an exasperated voice.

“I’m just teasing you again. I know that you’re not that kind of person—I wouldn’t be here if you were,” she explained with a heavy sigh.

Asahi didn’t blame her for being so astounded. The truth was that she had been spending a great deal of time alone with him at his place, whether intentionally or not. He had mixed feelings about the large amount of trust she seemed to place in him, but it meant that he got an excellent tutor out of it.

“I think we’ve got a good schedule going here. We can cook dinner, eat, and then study,” he proposed.

“That sounds good to me,” she replied.

“So should we make this a daily thing?”

“Yes, if it’s okay with you. Meeting daily will help us in achieving quick progress, after all.”

“I guess that’s true...”

There was nothing wrong with what she said, but Asahi wasn’t entirely convinced. His heart was trying to make sense of the jumbled feelings he had. Fuyuka, in contrast, was as calm and collected as ever.

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And so the two eventually reached an agreement where they would essentially scratch each other’s backs. In order for it to be as efficient as possible, they set a few ground rules:

First, they would split the cost of ingredients in half.

Second, Asahi would be in charge of procuring the ingredients, while Fuyuka would take care of the dishes.

Third, if either of them couldn’t make it to dinner, they would need to notify the other.

Fourth, studying would begin precisely one hour after washing the dishes.

Just as she had before, Fuyuka insisted on covering the entire cost of the ingredients. However, it was different from the week that had led up to the

sports tournament—Asahi and Fuyuka had their own duties to fulfill, and it was no longer a matter of doing a favor for one or the other. Asahi had finally managed to persuade her to go Dutch on the ingredients. From there, everything else was smooth sailing.

"Anyways, you're fine if we keep doing this until finals are over? I'm counting on you," Asahi said.

"I am. Likewise, I'm counting on you, as well. And yes, I feel this is the perfect opportunity for both of us to achieve our goals," she replied.

"Uhh, sure."

"You don't sound entirely convinced."

"Nah, it's nothing. It's just that... well, the timing's perfect for me with exams and all. I'm not really sure it's the same for you."

"What do you mean?"

"You know... Like, it might take more time to teach you how to cook properly... even after our exams... maybe," he faltered. He'd intended to sound more assertive, but it was hard to remain confident with the constant barrage of intense glares coming from her direction.

"Are you suggesting that I'm truly that helpless when it comes to cooking?"

It's true that Asahi had never once seen her cook before, but he could hazard a guess based on her previous knife-wielding skills. Still, he tried to reassure her. "No, that's not what I meant. Just that it's trickier than helping someone with math problems."

Improving on cooking was a broad and subjective goal to begin with, and they were limited to a month-long window. Fortunately for Asahi, Fuyuka was more than content with focusing on the basics.

"Alright, I guess we can leave it here for today. I'll call you tomorrow to figure out when we should meet up," Asahi concluded as he ended their session. He rose from his chair and prepared to see Fuyuka off at the door as they usually did, but she remained seated.

"C-Could you wait a moment, please?" Fuyuka mumbled.

"Hm? What is it?" He figured they'd already covered everything that needed to be said. When he turned around, he noticed a small, white, palm-sized box sitting on the table. Although he couldn't guess its contents from the outside, it somehow seemed familiar to him. "And this is?"

"You can consider it a token of my gratitude for everything you've done for me. Seeing as you wouldn't accept any money, I figured that this would

do," she explained.

"I already told you there's no need to pay me back... I did because I felt like it. It's no big deal, really."

"I can't accept that. I want to thank you for my ribbon, not to mention all the trouble you've gone through for me this past week."

"I mean, if you insist..." he reluctantly conceded. He was all too familiar with her obstinacy by now, and he would feel bad if he rejected her gift without even seeing what he was actually receiving. A strange and rather trivial thought flitted across his mind—what if she was giving him a box full of jewels? Her title was "Queen," after all. If that were the case, there was no way he could possibly accept them.

He slowly opened the box, which was surprisingly heavy for its size, and what should appear but a brooch embellished with three ruby-red roses. A sudden wave of déjà vu washed over him... or, rather, a sense that he'd heard about this brooch before.

"Isn't this the prize you get for being the MVP?" he asked with a suspicious tone.

"You would be correct."

"Ah, okay..." he faltered. It was obvious just by looking at the quality and luster of the accessory that it wasn't some cheap knockoff, even in his inexperienced eyes. In fact, it might have been *too* beautiful—he felt like he'd soil it with grimy fingerprints if he touched it, so he simply closed the box and handed it back to Fuyuka.

"So you're just going to reject this, too?" she asked incredulously.

"I can't accept it. You earned it through hard work. Besides..." he trailed off with some hesitation.

"Besides?"

"Nah, you know what? Don't worry about it."

Based on her reaction, it was clear that Fuyuka was unaware of the "legend" associated with the brooch. Despite its popularity within the female population at school, it wasn't a surprise that "The Ice Queen" hadn't caught wind of the rumors. That made it all the more difficult for Asahi to bring the topic up, however.

"You really seem to struggle with conveying your feelings..." Fuyuka whispered.

Asahi couldn't keep quiet after her remark and quickly blurted out, "Isn't this the legend—oh crap." He attempted to cover his mouth in a

panic, but the damage had already been done.

"What 'legend' are you talking about?"

There was no way he could conceal it any longer—Asahi proceeded to explain everything to Fuyuka.



“I-I Simply intended it as a token of my gratitude! Without your help, I wouldn’t have been able to participate in the tournament! That’s why I wanted to give it to you. I didn’t have the slightest clue about that legend! Not to mention it’s only nonsensical gossip, right?! Whatever the case may be, I didn’t mean any ill will by it!” Fuyuka frantically ranted. Her face was bright scarlet, and her shoulders were trembling intensely.

“I get it, I get it. Let’s just take a chill pill, okay?” he assured her. He felt a pang of guilt about how worked up she’d gotten, but there was also a sense of smug satisfaction in seeing how uncharacteristically flustered she had gotten. “*Ahem*... Anyways, as I was saying, I won’t be able to accept this.”

“That won’t do. Please, I insist,” she persuaded.

“You’re quite the stubborn one, aren’t you? How many times have I told you to not worry so much about repaying all your debts?” he snapped.

“Well, sorry for being myself, okay?! Taking it back now would only make it seem like I’m overly conscious about the rumors!”

Asahi wanted to refute her further, but he held his tongue. It was clear as day that she was worked up—her standard monotone was long gone, and raw emotion crackled in her voice. The legend must really have weighed on her mind. He should have known she would be so steadfast on this, as she always was with everything.

“I’ll be leaving now,” she announced as she stood up. The brooch remained ignored on the table.

“Hey, wait a second! What about the brooch?!” he cried.

“I hope to see you tomorrow night. Goodbye,” she said as she walked to the entrance. As she closed the front door, the sound echoed throughout the room.

“The brooch may not mean anything special if you give it to someone you don’t actually love, but...” he sighed with the brooch in his hand.

It was fair to assume that Fuyuka held no feelings of that kind for him either way—for better or for worse—so he shouldn’t fret too much about the legend. It wasn’t as though Asahi put any stock in urban myths to begin with. Despite that, he couldn’t get his mind off of that glistening trio of roses, no matter how hard he tried. In the end, his night was spent tossing and turning as he pondered what he should do with the brooch.

Chapter Ten

Growing Closer, Yet Still Worlds Apart

“Is this where you decided to put the brooch? It really brings out its color,” Fuyuka complimented. It was Saturday, the day after the sports festival. Fuyuka had shown up at Asahi’s door right at the specified time they had agreed upon the day before.

When she had walked through the door, it had only taken her a moment to notice the brooch at the entrance. Asahi had figured it would be optimal to leave it in a place where it could be easily seen, so he had placed it above the shoe rack. It was all for naught, however—Fuyuka had no plans of taking it back anytime soon.

“You sure it’s okay if I keep it?” Asahi asked incredulously. “I feel like it’s too valuable for me. Besides, it’s not like I’ll be putting it to good use.”

“I could say the same. That’s why I thought it was best to gift it to you.”

“If you insist...”

“Don’t get any absurd ideas, though—my present has nothing to do with that legend nonsense.”

“Yeah, I get it. Don’t worry about it,” Asahi assured her. He was never the self-centered type who would mistake a generous gesture from a classmate as anything other than a simple act of kindness.

Nevertheless, it seemed that Fuyuka had calmed down about the rumors linked to the brooch. She wasn’t blushing like she had just a day prior, and her tone wasn’t nearly as flustered either.

“Your table is rather messy today,” Fuyuka remarked as she made her way into the living room.

“Sorry, I didn’t have enough time to clean it all up,” he apologized.

“Don’t be. It makes me happy that you’re taking your studies so seriously.”

“If you say so. Looks like all the private lessons are paying off, huh teach?”

“W-Would you please stop calling me that? I’m not nearly as good as you say I am,” she protested in a flustered tone.

“Really? I think you’d make for the perfect tutor.”

“If you keep this up, then I’ll start referring to you as my teacher, as well. Professor Kagami...”

“Okay, point proven. Don’t know what’s worse, though—that or chef Kagami...” he said.

He decided to hold off on teasing her in favor of clearing up the table. As he was collecting his books, a certain title caught Fuyuka’s eye. Unlike the plethora of academic textbooks, this one boasted quite the colorful cover.

“Oh, this isn’t a school textbook. Is it a cookbook, perhaps?” Fuyuka asked. She picked it up and leafed through its contents. Tantalizing recipes sprung into view with each new page.

“Yep. That’s what we’re gonna be using for the cooking lesson today, so I kinda just left it around,” he answered.

Needless to say, there was only one conceivable way of putting a cookbook to use. That didn’t stop Fuyuka from wondering what they were going to do with it, however.

“You’re going to teach me how to cook using this book?”

“That’s the plan. Could you flip to page eight for me?”

“Page eight, page eight... Ah, here it is. The one that has a picture of curry?”

“Yup. You’re going to be making that today.”

There was a pause before she finally blurted out in a dumbfounded tone, “Excuse me?”

“You’re going to be cooking curry today,” Asahi reiterated, figuring that she just hadn’t heard him properly the first time. The only reply he received was the *thud* of the book slipping through her fingers and bouncing off the floor.

“*Me*? Make curry...?” she muttered to herself, wide-eyed. She whispered the phrase to herself several more times before she was able to get a grasp on the situation. Once she had finally managed to gain control over her quivering lips, she frantically approached Asahi. Perhaps he had made a mistake after all—her frenzied state was reminiscent of the behavior she displayed yesterday. “Th-This is the first I’m hearing of it!” she protested.

“Makes sense. I did just tell you about it,” he replied.

“Weren’t you supposed to be the one teaching me how to cook?!”

“That was the deal, yeah. But I figured it’s important to see where you stand ability-wise.”

“I see your point, but...”

“No buts. In the kitchen, now. All the ingredients are already set out on the table.”

Although he could admit he was being a tad pushy, he believed it was a necessary evil. After all, there was no point in teaching advanced techniques to a beginner and vice-versa. As her teacher, he felt it was his responsibility to figure out the areas in which she struggled the most in order to provide her with the guidance she needed.

“Are you really going to make me do this?” she protested.

“Yes. You said yourself that you’re not *terrible* at cooking, right?”

“You’re quite the bully, you know that?”

“Am I? I think I’m a pretty nice guy, personally.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she muttered with a frigid glare.

No matter what her opinions on the matter were, what couldn’t be denied was that Asahi was going easy on her. Sure, he had just put her on the spot without any prior warning, but he was asking her to prepare curry —one of the easiest dishes for a complete beginner to make.

There was also another reason why he had selected that dish in particular. Right before the sports festival, he had seen her at the store buying some of the essential ingredients required to make curry. He deduced that she must have had some experience with preparing it.

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t worried about her, though... he thought. He watched as a reluctant Fuyuka made her way into the kitchen. She stared blankly at the ingredients in front of her for a few moments before she picked up a kitchen knife. Her grip looked incredibly shaky and dangerous —so much so that Asahi struggled to stop himself from speaking up.

You’re supposed to wash the vegetables first, he continued his musings. In the end, he was able to keep himself in check. After all, the underlying goal behind this experiment was to assess her true cooking abilities.

Asahi had made up his mind, and so he took a seat near the counter where he could keep track of everything she was doing.

He had qualms about the way she handled the kitchen knife, the general method she followed while cooking the food, and the way she misjudged the time needed to properly boil all the ingredients together, and that was just to name a few mistakes. Her ability—or lack thereof—exceeded even his wildest expectations. Needless to say, his stomach was in knots throughout the whole process, and he had to hold himself back from interfering more than a few times.

The only thing he could take solace in was the fact that she'd followed Asahi's method of positioning her free hand correctly around the knife. That alone had made the time he'd spent on teaching her the claw grip worthwhile. While her movements were quite awkward, she still managed to successfully curl her left hand in a way that the knife's blade sliced through the vegetables and nothing else. Unfortunately, however, that was the sole thing she executed correctly.

One hour passed before the curry and rice were finally finished and ready to be served. Suffice to say, it hadn't been smooth sailing, what with Asahi virtually tearing his hair out at every step of the process. Nevertheless, each of them brought their hands together to say grace before they began eating.

Fuyuka chewed pensively before finally announcing, "This doesn't taste good."

"Definitely not the best," he agreed after having a spoonful of his own. One mouthful alone had been enough for him to taste how watery and under seasoned the curry was. With his second bite, he was able to discern that the unevenly cut vegetables were very undercooked. Overall, it wasn't a complete failure, though calling it anything other than "mediocre" would be an understatement.

"I fully agree with you, but I never expected you to be so blunt..." she grumbled.

"Maybe I should've sugarcoated my words? Or should I have just praised you regardless?"

"No, I wouldn't have wanted it any other way. Empty flattery never helps anyone improve, after all."

"Exactly. That's why I believe it's best to give my honest opinion on these occasions," he explained.

Asahi had a habit of flattering anyone who would provide him with a home-cooked meal—he'd tell them that it was "delicious" as a way of expressing his gratitude. This time was different, of course. He and Fuyuka were working toward improving her culinary skills, so it was necessary that he be frank for her sake.

Having said that, just about anyone could give a harsh critique of someone's food; Asahi's role afterward would be the crucial part of this process. He would have to propose suggestions on how to improve her cooking and guide Fuyuka so she could succeed in the future. In order for

that to happen, he had to tackle each of her shortcomings individually. Obviously, this wasn't limited to the sizable heap of issues that were her cooking methods—it also extended to determining the problems with how the final product tasted.

Asahi continued to sample the meal and deliberate on the ways that the curry could be improved upon. When he finally raised his head, he found Fuyuka staring at him with apologetic eyes.

"You don't have to force yourself to eat it all, you know," she told him as she looked pointedly at his half-finished plate.

"Hm? What makes you think I'm forcing myself?" he asked.

"You just said that... it wasn't tasty," she said. Her usual indifference was replaced by a rather shaky voice and a gloomy expression to match. The fact that her first attempt hadn't gone to plan likely weighed heavily on her. It was an almost inscrutable change, but Aashi had learned to pick up on her subtle cues as of late.

"You don't have to cater to my feelings and finish it all," she continued. "We could order something, or maybe it isn't too late for you to make something instead. Naturally, I'll be the one to cover the costs."

"It's true. This curry is far from the best," he stated.

"Then why don't we—"

"But it's still a dish you worked hard on making. I can't just simply throw it away," he argued. One mustn't waste food; it was an obvious statement, one that most people were taught at an early age. Still, it needed to be said in order to get the point across to Fuyuka. It wasn't a case of leaving a dish unfinished because it didn't suit his tastes or because he was too full. Each meal had its own story and a person who had given it their all to prepare it. Asahi couldn't possibly make light of their efforts by throwing it away, especially when the person who had cooked it was standing right in front of him.

"Let me give you my first piece of advice," he said. He paused to clear his throat, then continued. "Cooking isn't all about how good it tastes in the end. It's about how much love you put into it."

"How much... *love* you put into it?" she parroted.

"Love is the most important ingredient when it comes to preparing food. What I mean is... when you put a lot of care into your dish, that will come through to those who eat it. It makes them appreciate the dish that much

more. It's something anyone can learn, but it's one of those basics that's surprisingly difficult to master," he explained.

His mother had told him the exact same thing when he was a child, and he remembered how bizarre it had sounded to him back then. In fact, Chiaki has mentioned the same thing not too long ago in some strange coincidence. While he'd likely said it offhand just to impress his girlfriend, it was true that the lunch she'd prepared for him had been amazing.

Perhaps the "romantic" type of love was the special ingredient that gave some food its unique deliciousness, or so Asahi contemplated. Whatever the case was, it was still a technique that laid far beyond Fuyuka's current level. He needed to focus on teaching her the fundamentals.

"Everyone has to start out somewhere," he assured her gently. "I was just as bad—if not worse—when I started out. So don't worry too much about it, okay? I'll make a good cook out of you yet, no matter how long it takes."

He knew that an arrogant teacher who acted as if they were in a completely different league would be off-putting to any student. It wasn't unusual for a student to feel discouraged or frustrated, so it was important to encourage and assure them. That was another trick he had learned from studying under his parents.

"I'm just making sure, but you *do* want to become better at cooking, right?" Asahi asked.

"Indeed I do. That's why I'm showing you my complete incompetence," she replied.

"You really shouldn't be putting yourself down like that."

"There's no point in hiding it at this point. I'm not good at it, as you can clearly see. But you *are* going to help me with that, correct?" she asked, looking Asahi straight in the eye.

"Just leave it to me," he declared. "I'm gonna go all out starting tomorrow, so you'd better be ready."

"Please give me everything you've got! Though I'll warn you—I won't go easy on you either," she exclaimed.

"Oof... Don't go *too* hard on me, okay?" he appealed with a stiff expression. He wasn't exactly looking forward to the hectic weeks that lay ahead of them, but it also didn't feel particularly unpleasant. Even the curry had started to taste better than it had a moment ago, strangely enough.

When he finally managed to finish his plate, he looked to Fuyuka and said, “Thanks for the food. It was—”

Great. That was what he’d almost spat out by reflex, but he quickly stopped himself by taking a sip of water. He was well aware that he should save his praise for the right occasion. Still, he made sure—as he always did—to express his gratitude to the person who had prepared the meal.

“I’ll work hard until the day comes where you tell me my cooking is delicious,” she declared as her pink-coloured lips softened into a loose smile. Were Asahi’s eyes deceiving him, or was her skin turning a faint red? Whatever the case, one thing was for sure—“The Ice Queen” was smiling at him, and nobody else.

If only she smiled like this all the time, Asahi marveled.

Fuyuka carried the plates over to the sink and began to wash them with her usual frigid demeanor. A faint chuckle escaped Asahi. He felt that even her typical cold expression was slowly beginning to melt the more she visited his apartment.

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As the days passed, Asahi’s mutually symbiotic relationship with his unfriendly and brusque neighbor continued. He was making his way back to his apartment after a trip to the supermarket when he spotted an unfamiliar woman stepping out of Fuyuka’s apartment. She was tall—around Asahi’s height, if not taller—and had a slim figure. She donned a business suit that complemented her refined appearance.

The woman let out a sigh as she stared at the nameplate that read “Himuro.” She elegantly brushed some aside of her shoulder-length hair. At first, Asahi had assumed that she was upset about something; when he examined her further, however, it appeared as if she was actually worried about something.

Is that Himuro’s mother? he questioned himself. This was the first assumption that came to his mind. Then again, the woman didn’t resemble Fuyuka in any way. He thought that the woman might be a relative of hers. In truth, he didn’t have the slightest clue about who the mystery woman was, but since he came across her leaving Fuyuka’s apartment, he figured that they must be closely related in one way or another.

“Good evening to you,” the woman greeted when she noticed Asahi’s presence.

“Good evening,” he replied, albeit with some hesitation.

“Oh, are you Mr. Asahi Kagami, perhaps?” she asked, stopping him just as he was about to enter his apartment.

“How do you know my name?”

“Lady Fuyuka has spoken quite highly of you,” the woman explained, glancing at the nameplate next to his door and subsequently nodding to herself. Asahi was at a loss—he was utterly confused as to why an older woman would refer to both him and Fuyuka in such a formal manner.

She must’ve sensed Asahi’s bewilderment, because she promptly and courteously introduced herself. “Please forgive my belated introduction. I am Kaori Tachibana, the humble maid who currently serves the Himuro household.”

Given her elegant and refined tone, she must have been telling the truth. *I guess the rumors about Himuro coming from a well-off family were true after all,* he thought. Her household had their own *maid* and everything.

“Mr. Kagami, I implore you to take good care of Lady Fuyuka. She may come off as cold-hearted, even ruthless at times, but I can assure you that she is a fragile and delicate young girl underneath the surface,” Kaori pleaded with a deep bow, then took her leave without so much as waiting for a response.

Take good care of her, huh? he pondered. Kaori’s request seemed sincere, but he wasn’t exactly sure what he could even do for Fuyuka. The only thing he could offer was cooking lessons.

A fragile and delicate young girl underneath... Hmm... he mused. Kaori’s words swirled around in his mind as he opened the door to his apartment. At the same time, Fuyuka’s apartment door opened.

He turned around when he heard the door open and greeted her. “Great timing. I just came back from buying ingredients.”

“O-Oh, that’s good to hear. Thank you for going to the trouble,” she replied. Asahi took a look at the clock—it was five minutes before their arranged meeting time.

“Come on in. It’s pretty cold outside,” he urged.

“Um, Kagami...” she awkwardly called out to him as he was about to enter his place. He turned around and stared at her. “Did you happen to see a woman wearing a suit just a moment ago?” she asked.

“Yeah. Seems like she’s your maid.”

“How do you—”

“Know? She introduced herself to me,” Asahi explained. Fuyuka hung her head, a troubled expression on her face. After a while, she appeared to have made her mind up on something. She lifted her head and stared at him with determination.

“Kagami... I have to tell you something,” she said.

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“So what did you want to talk about?” Asahi asked after they had finished eating dinner and washing the dishes. They had postponed the discussion until they had finished with their daily routine.

“Tachibana, the person you met earlier...” she started. Fuyuka proceeded to explain that Tachibana, while a maid, worked exclusively for the Himuro household. She was highly capable and served, in a way, as Fuyuka’s caretaker.

“Wow, I guess rich people do live in a world of their own,” Asahi marveled.

“I appreciate that you’re impressed, but it’s mostly thanks to my father. When it was decided that I was to live alone in this apartment, he sent for a maid to look after me.”

“So *that’s* why you’re allowed to live alone.”

“Are you making fun of me?” she asked with a hint of suspicion.

“Wouldn’t dream of it. You’re imagining things,” he smoothly glossed over it. Fuyuka heaved a sigh in response.

“Tachibana attends to all of my daily necessities, from preparing my lunches to taking care of the housework. So, as you said, she helps me a fair amount.”

“Damn, I’m kinda jealous. Actually, wait a second...” his voice trailed off. Something about what she’d just said bothered him. He took a second to organize his thoughts before he spoke up again. “So if you have a maid, why didn’t you depend on her until now?”

Asahi was referring to all the events that had taken place between them recently, such as her sprained wrist and her intense fever. Perhaps her maid had simply not been on duty when Fuyuka had fallen ill. He could also see

Fuyuka refusing help when she had been searching high and low for her blue ribbon. Still, it didn't explain why she hadn't called on her maid when she had injured her wrist. It had taken several days to heal. It didn't explain their current situation either—why not just have Kaori teach her how to cook?

"Well, you see... she's taking a break because of family matters," Fuyuka elaborated.

"Okay, now it makes sense. So now she's back, and she came over to tell you the news?"

"No. Quite the contrary, actually—she came to let me know that she won't be able to attend to me for a while longer. She was wondering if I wanted somebody else to take her place," she explained with a hint of sadness. Just as Kaori seemed to be genuinely worried about Fuyuka, Fuyuka seemed to worry equally as much for her maid.

"So what are you gonna do?"

"I... I think I'll just wait for Tachibana to return."

"You sure you'll be able to handle all that housework on your own?" he asked dubiously.

"So you *are* making fun of me..." she grumbled with an icy glare that caused Asahi to wince. Though his doubts were warranted, given her previous track record, he decided to drop the subject.

"It isn't like Tachibana is here all the time, either. I do get the opportunity to do the cleaning and the laundry sometimes," she protested.

"You have a point there," he said. His doubts were now dispelled... save for one, that is. "What about the whole food situation?"

"Tachibana made meals for me in advance," she replied after a hesitant pause.

"I knew it was too good to be true!" he exclaimed. Fuyuka's incredibly mediocre culinary skills were hardly a recent development. Given that Kaori was out of the picture for a while, he had been particularly concerned about her eating habits. Asahi suspected that the culprit behind why she had fallen ill to begin with, in addition to the fact that she was living solely on convenience food, was entirely a result of Kaori's absence. Fortunately, she now had a stock of home cooking to depend on.

"That's why I have you," she squeaked in a tiny, frail voice.

"Hm?" he questioned, not having caught what she'd said.

“Our promise...” she continued in a louder voice. “You haven’t forgotten about our promise from yesterday, have you?”

“Oh, right,” Asahi answered. In other words, she wanted to tell him that she would be counting on him when it came to cooking lessons. “Actually, have you told your maid about this?”

“I have,” she replied after a brief pause.

“Ahh, so that’s why she told me to look after you,” Asahi mused. He understood why Kaori was worried—who wouldn’t be after witnessing Fuyuka in the kitchen? “Alright, guess we have to do our best for your maid’s peace of mind.”

“Indeed,” she said bashfully, hiding her flushed face behind a cushion. She remained silent, even when Asahi tried to speak to her. This embarrassed state of hers persisted until it was time to begin studying.

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A week had passed since the sports festival, and Fuyuka had finally started to show some form of improvement in the kitchen. For the daily lesson, she had managed to prepare five different dishes. As a result, there was a substantial increase in the number of plates that would need to be washed. Despite this, she had finished cleaning every single one of them, and the formidable pile of tableware that rested on the drying rack now sparkled with cleanliness.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“If I’m being lenient, I’d give 80 points out of 100,” he replied.

“I’d like to hear your honest thoughts.”

“In that case, you’d get a 70. You still take way too long to do the dishes, and you use a *lot* of water and detergent. Well, despite saying that, you’ve clearly improved. I feel like I can now sit back and let you clean with supervision.”

Asahi expected no less from the girl who was rumored to be the “perfect being.” She was incredibly perceptive and quickly picked up on whatever he taught her. While she was still rough around the edges, he was sure that she’d be able to nab herself a perfect score by the time finals came around. Unfortunately, however, this evaluation only applied to her dishwashing ability.

“You still have a ways to go when it comes to cooking...” he added.

“Wh-Wha...? You raise my spirits only to stomp all over them right after? You really are quite the bully,” she protested.

“I don’t know what to tell you. It’s just the truth,” he refuted. Fuyuka just didn’t have a knack for cooking—that was the conclusion he’d reached after seeing her try her hand at it for over a week. Whenever he made dinner, he had given her some beginner-friendly tasks to help out. He’d figured that she would learn better via practice. After all, how would she be able to improve with just theory alone?

Unfortunately, Fuyuka had continued to make one blunder after another. For example, whenever she cooked rice, she would constantly over boil it. The result was always a sticky mess. The way she cut her vegetables could be considered “avant-garde” if one was being kind, but the uneven, bulky lumps were not particularly pleasing to the eye. She did try her best to follow the recipes; unfortunately, because she was lacking in the basic foundations, the end result would always turn out to be... lackluster, to say the least.

Because of that, Asahi’s days had ended up becoming a hectic mess. Between attempting to correct Fuyuka’s mistakes and preventing her from getting too discouraged, he was always exhausted beyond belief by the time their meal was ready.

If you think I’m a bully, then what would you make of God? he mumbled to himself. The saying “God doesn’t give with both hands” couldn’t be any more apt when it came to Fuyuka. She was beautiful, intelligent, and incredibly gifted in many aspects... but cooking was not one of them.

To Asahi’s dismay, she struggled to learn even a fraction of what he’d imparted onto her. It had gotten to the point that Asahi couldn’t help but think she simply was not cut out for it.

“Ah, well. We’ll just take our sweet time with this. It does take some time getting used to,” he assured her.

“My thoughts exactly. I’m sure I’ll surpass even you with enough time,” she declared.

“Hey! Let’s not jump the gun here. You made a complete mess of today’s meal. Even yesterday, you—”

“Lalala, I can’t hear you,” she cut him off in a singsong voice and covered her ears. “I certainly was not the one who over-salted the food yesterday!”

“Lalala, yes you can,” he quickly matched her tone. “So at least you *are* aware of what you did...”

Her attitude reminded him of a sulky child going through a rebellious phase. Her voice was just as monotonous as ever, and she still maintained her blank expression for the most part. Still, there were glimpses every now and then of a normal high school girl. She had even begun to smile more often as of late. Asahi was happy to see such a shift in her disposition—so much so that he ended up cracking a smile as a result.

“I would love to know what’s so amusing, Kagami,” she retorted. “You’ve been grinning a lot recently.”

“Nah, it’s nothing. Just felt like laughing.”

“Dodging the question again, are we? It’s very rude to laugh when there’s no reason to.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. It makes you come across as a weird person. Not to mention that it’s just plain revolting.”

“Jeez, the food isn’t the only thing getting roasted today...” he mumbled.

She was still “The Ice Queen” in every way that mattered, from her harsh words to the way she stared coldly at Asahi. Every single action she displayed, no matter how minute, was calculated. It embodied the image of an icicle, frozen and sharp. Still, there were hidden depths to the iceberg that was her personality. Fuyuka would have normally pushed everyone away without as much as a second thought, but she had grown open to the idea of being more communicative. In fact, the blunt attitude she reverted to whenever he teased her reminded him of how *he* acted whenever faced with Chiaki and Hinami’s ridiculous antics.

“Ah, you’re laughing again. Is the ghost of some famous comedian making faces in front of you or something?” she spat.

“Correct as always. There’s one in just his skivvies hovering right behind you—”

“Eek! A-Are you serious?! Wh-Why would such a pervert be haunting me...?” she squealed as she jumped off the sofa and took a few steps backward. Asahi had intended to go along with her joke, but it seemed that Fuyuka had taken his words a little too seriously.

He felt as though he would never grow tired of seeing this new side she showed him whenever they spent time together. It was a nice change of pace. Her typically aloof, enigmatic nature contrasted so starkly against the

“real” her that it was somehow strangely adorable. So adorable, in fact, that it made Asahi crack his third smile of the day.

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Some time had passed since the dreaded “ghost” incident, and yet Fuyuka was still pouting.

“There’s no scientific evidence that ghosts exist. Typically, it can be dismissed as the human mind playing tricks on us—nothing more than hallucinations,” Fuyuka rambled. “I’m fully aware that there’s no possibility that ghosts exist, but our minds do tend to wander. We tend to second-guess ourselves, since we can’t actually see them, and...”

It seemed that Fuyuka had a habit of speaking at a rapid rate whenever she got flustered. Rather than being upset, it seemed like she was sulking, and she let it be known.

Asahi had a gripe with how absurdly strict she was during their studying session. Once it was over, however, he had no complaints—she had managed to explain things so thoroughly despite her sour attitude that it had been easy to understand. His criticism soon turned into praise.

“You’re really good at teaching English, Himuro. I might think you studied abroad or something if I didn’t know any better,“ he marveled.

“Flattery won’t get you anywhere.”

“I’m being serious here.”

Asahi figured she would have cooled off by now, but it appeared that she was still in ill humor. She would typically engage in small talk with Asahi before leaving, but that wasn’t the case this time. She hadn’t even started packing her things up yet. Asahi began to suspect that she really was holding a grudge against him for all of his teasing.

“I think it’s pretty cute that you’re afraid of ghosts,” he whispered.

“I’m sorry, did I hear something just now?” she asked, glaring at him.

“No, Ma’am,” he answered meekly. Asahi made the prudent decision to drop the subject. He then noted to himself that the formidable “Ice Queen” had a fear of ghosts—an unusually cute feature to have.

As she finally made her way to the door, he stood up to escort her out. “Oh yeah, don’t forget that I have plans for tomorrow,” he mentioned.

“Your friends are coming to visit, correct?” she asked.

“Yeah. By the way, don’t go getting any funny ideas about skipping on cooking, okay? I’ve given you the cookbook and everything, so you don’t have any excuses,” he pressed her like a nagging mother. “Oh, and be careful with how you hold the knife! Don’t forget to adjust the temperature of—”

His advice was cut off by a loud slam of the front door.

I made sure to let her know of my plans a few days ahead of time, so there shouldn’t be any major problems, he thought. He still felt a tinge of uneasiness that she was going to attempt cooking without him at her side tomorrow, but he had taught her all he could about the basics. Fuyuka seemed very eager to try it out herself, so everything would turn out fine... or so he kept assuring himself.

“Hah... I’ve been thinking a lot about her lately,” he muttered to himself mockingly as he clutched the brooch in his hand. It glistened, as it always had, in a lustrous ruby color. It was so mesmerizing that it brought whoever caught a glimpse of it closer; in turn, it bound them together by destiny.

Chiaki and Hinami will never let me hear the end of it if they find it, Asahi thought. “Now then, where do I hide it...?”

Asahi began to clean up the apartment and destroy all evidence related to the brooch in preparation for tomorrow’s visit. After all, the “Obnoxious Couple” would soon be gracing him with a visit.

Chapter Eleven

A Visit From the Obnoxious Couple

It was an afternoon no different from any other, and Asahi had just polished off yesterday's leftovers for lunch. He decided to take advantage of his ample free time and began vacuuming his room. After that, he finished up by spraying an air freshener around the apartment. At last, everything in the room looked to be in order. The intercom rang—a sound he had grown quite familiar with thanks to the events of the past few weeks—signaling the arrival of his expected guests.

Ding dong! Ding dong! Ding dong!

For any normal person, one ring would have sufficed. Unfortunately, his mischievous guests didn't seem to have gotten that memo as they incessantly wore out the button.

What am I gonna do with those two... he grumbled to himself. Their mere arrival beckoned a torrent of disgruntled sighs from Asahi. He felt that, at this rate, he was well on his way to breaking the world record for the amount of sighs heaved in a single day.

Although his friends had only come to have some fun and hang out, Asahi could only tremble at the potential shenanigans the couple had planned for the day. Who knows what they had up their sleeves. After they had managed to buzz the intercom a few dozen times in quick succession, Asahi was finally able to open the door.

"Where's the food AT?" Hinami cried enthusiastically as she entered.

"You just sit down and make yourself at home, Hina," Chiaki told her.

"That's *my* line, you know," Asahi protested. Perhaps it was due his own shortcomings that he had expected a typical greeting from these two. As instructed, Hinami immediately made her way into the living room, while Chiaki and Asahi stayed at the entrance.

"My Chii-pie's told me all about your place before! He said your apartment was massive and totally spotless and all, but damn—I didn't expect anything like this. Whoa, these lights are sick! Oh my god, look at this sofa! Isn't this the one that's super popular and, like, insanely fluffy?!" she exclaimed with her trademark enthusiastic tone. What was different was that she was a great deal more vivacious than usual—concerningly so, in

Asahi's eyes. He turned to Chiaki, the person who knew her best, and gave him a skeptical look.

"My Hina's been dying to drop by for ages now. It's no wonder she's bouncing off the walls like that," Chiaki explained.

"I guess that makes sense. Just make sure she doesn't make a racket; I really don't feel like getting any noise complaints," Asahi grumbled.

"You got it, pal. I'll keep her in check if push comes to shove."

"Thanks. Highly doubt I could handle her on my own, to be honest," Asahi said in a tired voice. He was anxious that Hinami's loud voice and exuberance would only aggravate Fuyuka further. She was already very displeased after yesterday's teasing, so he was hoping to avoid adding more fuel to that fire. "So yeah... make sure she doesn't get too out of hand, okay?" he added.

"Yeah man, I got it the first time. No need to keep nagging me about it," Chiaki said with a smirk.

"I don't like the look in your eyes one bit."

"Nah, man, it's nothing. I was just thinking that you're *awfully* considerate of your neighbors. Wonder if there's someone you're particularly interested in living right next to you..."

"You'd break a record at the Olympics for that leap in logic. Where did that even come from?" Asahi asked.

"Oof! It's just a joke, dude—no need for the serial-killer look. I was just curious. You've never really cared about your neighbors to this extent before," Chiaki quickly backtracked.

"Not wanting to disturb your neighbors sounds like common sense to me."

"Verily, you speak the unblemished truth. I implore you to forgive this worthless cretin," Chiaki apologized in a pitiful voice and a manner befitting a long-gone era. Still, his theory had hit the "veritable" bull's eye, so much so, in fact, that Asahi had to make a conscious effort to maintain a straight face. He wished that Chiaki would harness his sharp deduction skills and intuition in more fruitful areas—like academics, for example—but that may have been too much to ask considering his personality.

"Don't read into it so much. Sorry to rain on your parade, but there's nobody like that in my life," Asahi declared in a solemn tone, raising both his hands in protest. Chiaki was quick to apologize. It was one of his very

few redeeming qualities: he would retreat once he noticed the other person was feeling uncomfortable.

Asahi couldn't possibly tell them that Fuyuka was his next-door neighbor, let alone that the two of them had daily dinner and lessons at his place. It would be a disaster if the two were to find out. Asahi couldn't help but recoil at the thought of them persistently pestering him about it and sticking their noses where they didn't belong, regardless of how *he* felt about it.

The only way to prevent the worst case scenario was by pretending he was irritated each time the particular topic came up. Unbeknownst to his friend, he felt a cold bead of sweat trickle down his spine. He heard a set of boisterous footsteps approaching from behind him, and he started to sweat profusely.

"What're you guys talking about? Did Asahi finally nab himself a girlfriend?" Hinami asked, eyes filled with curiosity. She had returned to them after fully admiring every nook and cranny of the living room. In return, Asahi responded with a sigh—his third one that day.

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"Asahi, I'm bored!" Hinami exclaimed.

"Can't really do anything about that. I *told* you there wasn't much to do here," Asahi retorted.

"Booo! I guess you're right, though—there's, like, nothing cool here."

"I know, right? There's nothing fun to do at Asahi's place," Chiaki interjected.

"Cool that you guys are on the same page, but it's pretty rude to point that out when you don't even own the place," Asahi admonished.

It seemed that his advice had fallen on deaf ears. Hinami continued to voice her complaints for a while. Eventually, she grew tired of that, as well. She placed the game controller down, stood up, took a few shaky steps, then plopped herself down on Chiaki's lap.

"Hey, I thought I told you no flirting while you're over," Asahi nagged the couple again.

"She's just using me as a humanoid sofa. It's the newest fad. Get with the program, Asahi," Chiaki explained.

“Yeah! And guess what? It can move on its own, so you can take it anywhere you want!” Hinami added.

“It’s got a ton of other features, too—like wrapping itself around the person sitting down to warm them up!” the humanoid sofa continued. It seemed that this cutting-edge model, previously known as Chiaki, had some sort of coaxing functionality installed into it, as well. It was searching for any sort of excuse to get physical with Hinami.

If this isn’t straight up flirting, I don’t know what is, Asahi grumbled to himself. He let out his 10th sigh of the day—a lauded accomplishment—before turning to look at the clock on the wall. “Prime time to go out and buy some ingredients for dinner,” he announced.

“Totally! Buena idea, Asahi!” Hinami shouted with unbridled vigor.

“Hell yeah, the night’s main event is about to kick off!” Chiaki followed.

Asahi couldn’t help but feel a tinge of pride and happiness as the couple, who had just been lazing about, became so fired up at the mention of food. As he headed to the entrance of his apartment, Chiaki called out, “Yo, can you make us some Hamburg steaks? Thanks in advance.”

“Yeah! Oh, and don’t forget that I like mine with cheese on top, okay? We’ll be waiting for you!” Hinami chirped.

“The streets can get pretty dangerous at night, my dude, so be careful out there!” Chiaki added.

“Nice try, but you’re coming with me. Off the sofa. Now,” Asahi demanded.

“H-Hey, no need to be so violent, I get it! I was just joking! No need for that scary look either... I’m gonna have nightmares tonight...”

Asahi had his doubts about whether his friend was truly playing around or not, but he wasn’t about to take his chances. He was reluctant to leave the couple alone for a number of reasons aside from the most obvious one. He’d already ensured that all of Fuyuka’s belongings—the dishes and cups she brought over that she would use for dinner—were concealed deep within the recesses of his cupboard, and he’d also made sure he returned all of the textbooks with her name on them beforehand. In addition to those, he’d also hidden the brooch inside the dresser in his bedroom yesterday; no doubt the duo would raise hell if they came upon it.

Everything had been thoroughly attended to, as he’d taken all scenarios into consideration. Still, the notion of leaving them unsupervised spurred a

lingering feeling of anxiety in Asahi that was impossible to shake off.

"Come on, guys, let's go," Asahi urged them.

"Okaaay! We're right behind you!"

Asahi looked behind him to ensure the obnoxious couple were actually preparing to accompany him. When he opened the door, a certain somebody was standing right in front of him.

"Ah..."

"H-Huh..."

Two voices—one charming, one dumbfounded—echoed throughout the foyer. What had prompted Asahi's cry of surprise was the unexpected appearance of those all too familiar lush raven locks. It was Fuyuka, a shopping bag dangling from one hand, currently making her way across the corridor of the apartment complex. In a split-second judgment, Asahi was about to slam the door shut; unfortunately, he had not been quick enough. Chiaki and Hinami were right behind him, wide-eyed and slack-jawed.

Silence permeated in the room for a brief moment before disarrayed mutters of disbelief started to flit about. The three of them struggled to process the situation at hand.

"... That was Himuro, right...?"

"... I think so, yeah..."

Chiaki and Hinami stared at each other with befuddled expressions. They took a few slow, stupefied blinks before they finally comprehended what was happening.

"Yo, Asahi? Wanna tell your good ol' buddy what exactly Himuro is doing by your apartment?" Chiaki asked with his usual irritating smirk.

"Oh, Mr. Asahi? Care to explain what's going on between you and Himuro?" Hinami swiftly followed up with a question of her own. Her grin was nearly record breaking—it was easily the widest one she'd worn all day.

Asahi tried to retaliate by giving them the cold shoulder. Unfortunately, his complete silence had little to no effect against their tenacity. The barrage of questions continued for some time. A fair few were egregiously misdirected, but others were dangerously close to the mark—so much so that retaining his composure proved to be a difficult task.

Asahi had to accept the fact that the couple now knew he and Fuyuka were neighbors. Instead, he opted it would be in his best interest to focus on stopping the romance-obsessed duo's nosy inquiries. He knew he needed to

act quickly, as they were already spinning wild tales and delusions about the nature of their relationship.

If they find out about everything that's happened between us and how we meet each other every evening, I'll never hear the end of it. They'll blabber about how we're "destined" to be lovers... God, this is why I was hoping to keep it a secret from them in the first place, Asahi complained internally.

His eyes wandered to the transparent plastic bag Fuyuka was holding. He could make out the diverse array of colors indicative of fresh vegetables; a welcome change to all the convenience food that had previously been a staple for her. He was glad that she took his advice from yesterday to heart. Surely, this meant that she was making a serious effort toward learning how to cook for herself. Unfortunately, the time and place didn't allow him for much celebration. Asahi had only had the best of intentions when he'd meddled into her business, but he'd never expected it to come back and haunt him to such a degree.

Yet another sigh escaped him.

In an ideal scenario, Fuyuka would go back to her apartment without so much as batting an eye, as was expected of "The Ice Queen." Asahi figured that would be the fastest way to debunk Chiaki and Hinami's absurd fantasies. However, it looked as though Fuyuka was rooted to the spot. It wasn't like her to misconceive the intricacies of the situation and fail to act accordingly—not with her superior intellect. However, she'd faltered when he first opened the door. It was entirely understandable, given how the whole thing had taken her by surprise.

Unfortunately for Asahi and Fuyuka, her temporary paralysis had provided the perfect opportunity for Hinami—with her romance-riddled brain—to thoroughly interrogate Fuyuka. "Hey, hey! What's the relationship between you two?" she demanded.

"Huh?" Asahi blurted out after a stupified pause.

A chilly gust of wind blew as a bright voice, which contrasted heavily with the gravity of the situation, echoed across the dark hallway. Fuyuka stayed silent. Her eyes shot about briefly before she hung her head slightly and looked down.

"Drop it, Hinami. Can't you see that you're making her uncomfortable?" Asahi quickly jumped in.

"Whaaa? Then why don't *you* answer the question, Asahi?"

Hinami's question was simple—deceptively so. It took Asahi a few moments to conjure up a reply as he battled with a strange uneasiness that was slowly consuming his heart. "She just happens to live next to me," he finally answered.

"It's gotta be fate, I'm telling ya! You two start out as friends, but as you get to know each other more, your relationship grows into—" Hinami was just beginning to go off on a tangent before Asahi quickly cut her off.

"She's just another neighbor. Nothing more, nothing less," he declared. It was the bare truth. He wasn't sure if it was the correct answer, but the only way to quell Hinami's excitement was by giving her a boring answer.

"What about you, Himuro? Got any... *comments*... on the... matter? Huh?" Hinami's voice slowly trailed off as a loud *slam* next door served as an answer. Fuyuka had finally analyzed the situation with clarity and shifted back to her usual "Ice Queen" demeanor. The cold aura that surrounded her, accentuated by the unforgiving chill of winter, was something that Asahi hadn't experienced in ages.

"Gah! See what you did, Asahi?! She went back to her room because *you* felt the need to interrupt me..." Hinami complained. "There was so much I wanted to talk about, too..."

"Really now? Wow, sorry to ruin your *engaging* conversation. From where I'm standing, she wasn't exactly talking up a storm like you were," Asahi retorted.

"Th-That's true, BUT! She was just about to say something before you came in and ruined it! You better prepare yourself, 'cause you're in for some intense Q and A!"

"God, why always me...?" Asahi grumbled.

The worst possible outcome had occurred. Not only was Asahi forced to find a way to fend off Hinami's excessive curiosity, but he was also particularly unsettled by Chiaki's passivity. His friend had been simply standing behind him with his typical annoying grin the entire time.

Their schedule was packed for the day—they were going to shop for ingredients, prepare dinner, eat it, and then hang out. That meant Asahi was burdened with a full day of attempting to avoid the obnoxious couple's prying questions until they eventually left. His mood was not the best, to say the least.

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"Is it just me, or was Himuro a little different today?" Hinami asked.

"I get what you're saying. I feel like she's a little bit more approachable or something," Chiaki responded.

"Same! Like, obviously she's still as distant as ever... but it's not the same as before."

The three of them sat around the small dining table and enjoyed some freshly-made Hamburg steak with cheese. It wasn't exactly pleasant for Asahi, however, as a certain name kept cropping up in their conversation. Chiaki and Hinami had continued to pester Asahi about his neighbor all the way from grocery shopping to their meal. And while the topic would briefly shift to praising the food he'd put so much effort into making, it would soon come back around to Fuyuka. It did little to relieve his headache, and he'd lost track of how many times he'd sighed by that point.

"I walked up to her during our basketball match and told her she was crazy skilled for nailing that buzzer beater. She was really sweet and told me that I played well too, but GET THIS!" Hinami exclaimed, her voice reaching a fever pitch by the end. "I swear she was *actually* smiling when she said that. Can you believe it?!"

"Wow, that's some juicy information right there. I've never heard anyone mention seeing her smile," Chiaki marveled.

"There's been a new rumor flying around that "The Ice Queen" has finally started to mellow out a bit, and I think we know why now."

"Captain Hinami, are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Haha! As observant as ever, Private Chiaki. The truth is that... it's all thanks to the romantic relationship between her and Asahi!" she proclaimed, pointing her finger at Asahi as if imitating some kind of detective. Her eyes were twinkling with an innocence akin to that of a child that had just received a new toy. Regrettably, the toy in this case just so happened to be Asahi. He didn't find her act adorable in the slightest.

"You said it yourself, Detective—it's a baseless rumor with no conclusive evidence to back it up. I know it makes for great teasing material for you two, but you're going to cause serious problems for Himuro if you keep it up," Asahi warned.

“Y-Yikes... the look on your face is pretty scary...” Hinami sputtered timidly.

“Then focus on eating your food before it gets cold instead of spouting nonsense. I put a lot of effort into making it, you know.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true. Gotta enjoy this absolute masterpiece while it’s still hot,” she agreed.

“Good girl. Here, you can have some of mine as a reward.”

“Whoa, really?! As expected from a Chad in disguise!”

Asahi had trouble understanding the obscure lingo she’d just uttered, but decided not to address it for the time being. He was content with the fact that he’d managed to stop Hinami from pursuing the matter any further.

Chiaki, however, chose to stoke the flames even further. “If we’re talking evidence, then I might just have some,” he boldly claimed.

“WHA—?! For real?!” Hinami blurted out.

“What are you even on about?” Asahi asked. He had given his friend a doubtful look, but in truth, Chiaki’s proclamation had made his heart stop briefly.

Chiaki carried on with his explanation, now full of confidence. “Think about it logically: we’ve got the ultra distant and cold Himuro on one hand, and the warm and friendly Kagami on the other. They’re polar opposites... and you know what they say about those, don’t you? That’s right, opposites attract.”

“Does this mean...?” Hinami asked.

“Yes, Hina. I think so, too.”

“You guys are delusional. It’s all in your head,” Asahi voiced his objection.

The rumors Hinami had brought up had already reached his ears as well, although they never went beyond how Fuyuka had grown more talkative or more emotive. As inconsequential as they seemed, they were changes in her character that nobody had ever imagined occurring in their lifetime. The combination of this gossip, in addition to her being awarded the MVP at the sports festival, had only helped her popularity among the students skyrocket. Naturally, Asahi wasn’t exactly in a rush to shamelessly claim that her sudden change of heart was all thanks to him.

“There was also one more thing I’d like to point out... though, ultimately, it’s just my own opinion,” Chiaki continued, wearing a daring

smile that challenged Asahi's constant denial. "Himuro seemed really bummed out when you said you were just neighbors."

"Yeah... now that you mention it, she did look kinda down when she walked back to her apartment," Hinami added.

"Right? That's why I think there's more to it than what Asahi's letting on... But hey, I'm not gonna do you dirty and force it out of you if you're not cool with talking about it. That ain't my style," he assured, abiding by his personal code of knowing when to drop the subject. Hinami took a page out of his book and nodded in agreement, clearly trying her best to suppress her unrelenting inquisitiveness.

The couple were true to their word, as neither of them spoke of Himuro through the rest of the meal. They even offered to do the dishes as a token of gratitude for Asahi's efforts. He decided to accept their kind offer, so he went to relax on the sofa.

A lot had happened that day, and he was completely exhausted as a result. He felt as though his drowsiness would overtake him any second if he wasn't vigilant.

"Himuro seemed really bummed out when you said you were just neighbors."

Asahi pondered the meaning of those words which continuously swirled around in his hazy consciousness. He'd had no choice but to tell them that they were just neighbors. He'd assumed that Fuyuka would be on the same page, that she wasn't the type that would take it to heart. But no matter how hard he contemplated why Fuyuka would be dejected, the answer would continue to elude him.

What is my relationship with Himuro? Asahi reflected. They had built up a routine of having dinner together and helping each other with school work. "Just another neighbor"—his words—were no longer sufficient to properly encapsulate their relationship. Still, Asahi couldn't think of a better way to define them.

I wonder what she thinks of me, Asahi pondered to himself. His eyes were growing heavy. As they slowly closed, Fuyuka's crestfallen expression dominated his thoughts.

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“You’re both dead meat,” Asahi declared.

“Whoa! Easy there, chief! It’s not permanent marker, so it’ll wash off easily!” Chiaki hastily assured him.

“Do you realize how hard it was not to laugh and ruin the surprise?! It’s partly your fault for not noticing until now! *Pfft*!” Hinami chuckled.

In the end, it seemed that thinking about a solution for his baffling problem had sapped Asahi’s remaining energy. He’d nodded off for some time and woken up to a pair of disconcerting smirks on his friend’s faces. At first, he’d paid them no heed, and they had continued to hang out and play video games. Finally, just when it was about time for Chiaki and Hinami to return home, they told them about the prank between peals of hysterical laughter—they’d drawn a mustache on his face while he had been asleep.

“See you later, Asahi! Thanks for having us. It was a blast!” Hinami exclaimed.

“Yeah, dude! That Hamburg steak was freakin’ tasty!” Chiaki added.

Although Asahi had been at the couple’s mercy for the majority of the day, it hadn’t sparked any hard feelings. He’d had fun today, and that was all that mattered. With this newfound realization, Asahi expressed his gratitude by gently patting each of them on the head as he showed them out of his apartment.

Chapter Twelve

Proof of Friendship

It was the day after Chiaki and Hinami had paid Asahi a visit. It was a day just like any other—Asahi went about his regular routine while doing his best to avoid the obnoxious couple as much as he could. Once evening arrived, there came the usual ringing of the intercom.

"Sorry for barging in," she apologized in her standard monotonous voice as she entered the apartment. Asahi was concerned about how her mood would be given his earlier comment about her being "just another neighbor," but his anxiety appeared to be unfounded.

I'm so stupid for worrying about so much, but whatever, he mentally told himself off as he recollected himself and focused on the task at hand.

"Apologies for always being such a bother..." Fuyuka apologized.

"Nah, don't worry about it. I mean, we both agreed to this, remember?"

"Indeed," she agreed after a brief pause.

Although Asahi tried to make her feel at ease through his trademark banter, he was beginning to grow uneasy himself. Why wouldn't he, seeing as this had been the fifth time they'd had this particular conversation that day alone?

Asahi was used to seeing her make mistakes—and reacting deftly to them—when cooking. A blunder or two was well within reason when she stood in front of the kitchen counter, and she would never fail to be frustrated with herself. Still, that day had been particularly disastrous. Fuyuka had confused sugar for salt, completely butchered her knife-holding technique, spilled some oil on the floor, and—just when Asahi was certain things couldn't get any worse—dropped a plate in the sink.

The only saving grace was that she hadn't hurt herself. Something was clearly on her mind, though; she seemed absentminded.

"Are you... thinking about what happened yesterday?" he inquired as he called to mind what Chiaki had said yesterday. "The Ice Queen" responded with a startled expression, but didn't respond. There was a prolonged period of awkward silence that persisted between the two. Still, it was essentially a response in Asahi's eyes. As always, he was reluctant to push her when she didn't wish to speak.

Perhaps it was Asahi's thoughtful and conserved nature that allowed him to engage with "The Ice Queen" as much as he did. He knew he would be lumped into the same group as everyone else otherwise—rejected, ignored, and unable to get a single glimpse past her frigid façade. Perhaps it was also because he wanted to get to know who she truly was: the girl named Fuyuka Himuro, not the ever-distant "Ice Queen" whose heart seemed to eternally be locked away.

"I'm still not sure about how to answer the question your friend asked me yesterday..." she finally whispered. No other question could possibly have stumped her as much as that one had.

"What's the relationship between you two?"

"I felt pain in my chest when I heard you say we were just neighbors," she continued quietly. "I couldn't for the life of me understand why. It's what I originally wished for... what I wanted... but now I'm left wondering about our relationship, and I can't seem to find an answer."

Asahi listened attentively to her every word. He never thought she'd spent so much time trying to conjure up an answer. *Guess Chiaki was right after all,* he thought to himself. His words had been continuously swirling around in her head, although she couldn't exactly grasp the reason why. Asahi, however, knew the cause behind such jumbled feelings—it was surely because he had become a constant presence in her life, or so he thought. They'd spent so much time together by then—too much time, in fact. It was too late for them to go back to being "just neighbors," and that triggered an extreme feeling of uneasiness and anxiety in the indomitable "Ice Queen."

"I just said that so they'd get off my back. That's all..." he mumbled.

"Really?" Fuyuka asked after pausing shortly, clearly suspicious.

"Yeah," he asserted with conviction. The reality of the matter was significantly different, however. Last night, Asahi himself had spent several torturously long hours ruminating over the nature of their relationship before he'd finally fallen asleep.

"... I see you as a friend, Himuro," he answered. A friend—the simple word was enough to make him feel embarrassed. He could feel his heart pounding frantically and his face growing increasingly warmer.

"Friends..." she muttered in a wide-eyed daze. Their eyes met for a quick second before she averted her gaze downward again. With her head

hung so low, Asahi struggled to make out the expression hidden behind her glossy black hair. Still, he was certain she had reacted to what he'd said.

Another thought occurred to Asahi—how could they possibly be considered friends? There was nothing that could attest to that fact, nor any sort of item that could serve as proof of that friendship. Still, that didn't stop him. One could think of anybody as a friend... That was the answer he had arrived at after a long night of thinking.

"I've been avoiding making friends for as long as I can remember," Fuyuka finally spoke up in a trembling voice. "I thought I wanted to live alone without having to worry about coming into contact with others..."

Asahi kept his queries of "Why?" and "Since when?" under check as he waited for her to continue.

"But now, I..." she trailed off. There was a great deal of hesitation in her voice, as if she were taking her sweet time to properly convey her thoughts. Unlike their previous bouts of silence, this one felt rather warm and pleasant. Finally, she continued, "I... want to think of you as a friend, as well."

Asahi remained silent for a few seconds before asking, "What does that even mean?"

"We can't officially become friends without something to signify it, right?" she explained. Aashi was surprised, but also relieved that she shared a similar sentiment to him. Proof of their friendship—an intangible bond that connected two people, one where Asahi knew how to convey his feelings.

"Fuyuka," he spoke in a gentle tone, or, at least, that was how he'd intended to sound. He was so flustered that his voice came out ever so slightly shaky. He scratched his head and recalled the last time someone had asked him to refer to them by their first name. When Hinami had demanded it, he hadn't been exactly enthusiastic about the idea. Now it was even worse, given that he was the one who had initiated it. He was embarrassed to such a degree that he couldn't even bring himself to make eye contact with Fuyuka and averted his gaze. "Friends... usually call each other by their first names. It's a simple act of intimacy... but we can stop if it makes you feel uncomfortable," he muttered.

What he had really meant—though he hadn't actually said it—was, *I think that would be more than enough proof that we're now friends*. He wasn't sure how she would react to or feel about it. The dreaded silence

returned once more. Eventually, a certain sound reached Asahi's ears. It was a frail voice, inaudible almost, though still clear and beautiful nonetheless.

"Asa... hi..." her voice trembled as she trailed off. The person in question reflexively turned his face toward the voice that uttered his name. That was when their eyes met.

"Will you... become my friend, Asahi?" she continued while staring firmly and directly at him. Her cheeks, shrouded by locks of silken hair, were imbued by a color of red like never before. Her eyes began to water in embarrassment, but they were also sparkling in expectation.

She's... adorable, he thought to himself, as if such a simple expression would suffice in properly describing her. He was utterly mesmerized, attested to by his heart practically racing a mile a minute. And, much like Fuyuka, he felt like his body was burning up from the inside. No mirror was necessary for him to know that his face was the exact same shade of crimson that hers was.



"Sure," he finally answered after he broke out of his stupefied daze. Doubts lingered within the depths of his mind, however, and questioned why it felt unusually “special” for them to refer to each other by their first names.

Sure have been dealing with a lot of crap recently, he mused. At the very least, he finally had the answer to one of his many problems: he and Fuyuka finally had put a proper label on their relationship. There was no need to mull over the pile of unanswered questions at the moment. Slowly but surely, they would solve each one of them one by one, or so Asahi thought.

“Glad we got that out of the way,” he spoke up. “Now, I want you to be focused and ready to go for tomorrow’s cooking class, okay? I’m not a fan of spending the evening scrubbing oil off the floor.”

“Wh-Why are you bringing that up now?!” she cried.

“I couldn’t tell you earlier because you looked so grim, but you seem fine now,” he explained. It was true—she appeared to be much more relaxed than she was just a few moments ago. That was short-lived, however, as her expression quickly clouded over once he brought up the tragedy of an hour ago.

In truth, it was nothing more than a diversion—the general mood felt awkward and he wanted to scourge that ticklish feeling he had inside. He figured that shifting the conversation would do the trick and, in turn, calm his rapidly beating heart.

“You really are quite the bully... Asahi.” Her voice quivered as she pouted and looked at him with upturned eyes. He was caught off guard and almost blurted out what he was thinking. *That was so goddamn cute...*

Much to his disappointment, things hadn’t gone according to plan. His heart continued to palpitate like mad after she’d shown him such an innocent, youthful expression befitting her age. *That was just plain cheating,* he grumbled to himself. The rose-colored lips, perfectly puckered into a pout, and the sulky gaze would have been enough to throw any man for a loop.

This can’t be good for the heart, he continued. While he was the one who had suggested the idea, he wasn’t convinced that he could get used to Fuyuka calling him by his first name. Still, if he was this nervous about it, there was no doubt that she felt the same.

Fuyuka's face was slightly flushed as she tried to conceal a timid smile. *This timid side of her is also adorable*, Asahi thought. It proved to be too adorable, in fact—he had to avert his gaze once again as he busied himself with preparing the textbooks and other materials they needed to study.

Chapter Thirteen

A Sweet Promise

The days continued as Fuyuka and Asahi gradually got more and more used to calling each other by their first names. They'd faced several hurdles—at first, they stumbled over their words, their voices cracked more often than not, and they even backtracked multiple times to using surnames. It hadn't been a smooth process, but it finally seemed that they were accustomed to it.

There was no particular change to their daily routine, however. Fuyuka assisted Asahi with his studies; in exchange, he taught her how to cook. The only noticeable difference was in Fuyuka's demeanor—Asahi could sense her ice-cold attitude beginning to melt away.

"This is where the quadratic formula must be implemented to derive our answer. First, you need to substitute for alpha, and then... are you listening to what I'm saying, Asahi?"

"O-Oh, yeah. Sorry. Just spaced out a bit."

"Please pull yourself together; it's vital that you focus on this. The final exams are practically knocking on the door," she rebuked.

"Yeah, you're right..."

Fuyuka had changed the strategy of the studying sessions in accordance with the rapidly approaching exams. She had compiled a bundle of short quizzes and other notes she had taken, and it had really paid off—he was making impressive progress on his studies as a result. It was clear he understood the responsibility placed upon him. Fuyuka had gone to a notable amount of trouble to provide all this supplementary material for him, not to mention the time and effort she took each day to teach said materials to him. That was why he was so determined to give his all. Recently, however, he'd been unfocused with his studies... and for good reason.

"I'm positive that this problem will appear on the exam. This third one, too—on the next page..."

Fuyuka was sitting right next to Asahi and pointing out the questions that she expected would turn up on the upcoming exams. Unfortunately, her earnest explanations went in one ear and out the other. His mind was too occupied with how close they were to each other, especially considering

how they used to sit face-to-face not long ago. Their shoulders brushed against each other each time someone would go to flip a page, and he could clearly make out the fragrant scent of her perfume. Although he usually wasn't the type to get overwhelmed by such minute details, he felt that it was slowly chipping away at his sanity.

"Let's stop here for the day," she abruptly concluded.

"Already? It's kinda early, isn't it?" he asked.

"Your head's in the clouds, Asahi. I doubt you can concentrate any longer," she clarified as she pouted in obvious displeasure. He couldn't come back with a retort—"The Ice Queen" had hit the mark once again.

"I'm sorry, I really am. You're putting in this much effort for me, and here I am, getting all distracted..." he apologized.

"There's no need to apologize. Our sessions give me the perfect opportunity to review the material, as well," she assured him, her mouth curled up into a faint smile. This gentle expression of joy had long ceased being a rare sight to behold. Ever since they had started calling each other by their first names, she began to smile more than ever before; she had even grown more talkative. Although her speech was still just as stiff and formal, Asahi could sense that the distance had closed between them.

"Well then, I guess I'll take my leave. Good night."

"Bye. See you tomorrow. Same time, same place, right?" he asked as he escorted her to the door.

"Of course. Please ensure you're able to fully concentrate by then," she said with a smirk. This was yet another new side of her that he had never seen before. Her recent demeanor made her usual distant attitude seem like nothing more than a fever dream. He was certain this was a new facet to their friendship. Such were the musings Asahi dwelled upon as he returned to the living room. His cellphone, left neglected on the counter, vibrated, breaking him out of his reverie. Someone must have sent him a message.

Probably from Hinami or Chiaki, he thought to himself as he checked the notification. His expression soured as he saw who had sent it. It was from Toko Kagami—his mother.

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It was the night before finals. Fuyuka and Asahi had finished eating their dinner in a hurry so they could get to studying as soon as possible. Their sessions were always meticulously planned out, and tonight was no different. Their objective was to thoroughly pore over the exam material.

They both were aware it would do more harm than good if they tried to desperately cram new information, so they opted on quizzing each other instead. One would give the other a problem to solve and vice-versa—that way, they would make up for the gaps in each other's knowledge. Things were proceeding smoothly until a sharp snapping sound disrupted their concentration.

"Are you kidding me right now?" Asahi grumbled. He heaved a sigh as he pressed the top of his mechanical pencil. It appeared to be broken, as there were no clicking sounds and no lead being fed through the pencil. Taking it apart and assembling it again yielded similar results.

"You use that one quite a bit, I've noticed," Fuyuka noted.

"I do. Never expected it to give out on me the night before the exam, though. I'm pretty sure I have a spare, at least... I can always buy a new one later anyways," he said as he grabbed a cheap-looking replacement from his pencil case.

"Is that a different type?" she asked.

"Yeah. The one I broke was on the heftier side. I figured it would last longer, but guess not."

"I see."

That mechanical pencil had been Asahi's favorite—it was of high quality and boasted an elegant design which had certainly warranted its expensive price tag. It had also been quite durable, as Asahi had been using it since middle school. He was confident he hadn't treated it poorly, so the only natural conclusion was that it had simply reached the end of its lifespan.

With that out of the way, Asahi shifted his attention to his studies. Fuyuka, however, still appeared to be troubled. "Is something the matter, Asahi? Are you tired?"

"What makes you say that?" he asked.

"You're sighing more than you normally would..."

Asashi didn't feel particularly drained. On the contrary, he felt excellent —both mentally and physically. He had never noticed until Fuyuka pointed it out, but it seemed that he sighed frequently on a daily basis.

“Shall we take a break?” she continued.

“Nah, it’s all good. I’m not tired at all. I guess it’s just become a habit of mine.”

“I think a break would do us good either way. There’s no need to work yourself to the bone,” she declared with determination, leaving no room for discussion. She proceeded to stand up and head toward the kitchen. When she finally returned, she held two cups in her hands.

“Would you care for a drink?” she asked.

“Yeah, I could use some coffee. Sorry to trouble you,” he apologized.

“It’s no trouble at all,” she assured him as she walked back into the kitchen. “Please make yourself comfortable.”

“I appreciate the gesture, but, like I said, I’m not actually tired or anything,” he insisted as he watched her brew the coffee. She appeared to know what she was doing, so Asahi decided to laze around on the sofa for a while. He continued to sigh heavily, although he did so on purpose. It wasn’t that he was fatigued—he was simply fed up with the heavy workload and formidable pile of questions they still needed to go through.

“Sorry for making you wait,” she said as she brought him a steaming-hot cup of coffee.

“Thanks a bunch,” Asahi said. He blew on it before taking a sip. The unique bitterness of coffee spread along his tongue, followed by a creeping tinge of sweetness. It was the same familiar taste he always enjoyed. “That hits the spot.”

“I’m glad you like it. You add a spoonful of sugar and just a small splash of milk to it usually, correct?” she noted.

“Yeah. I see somebody did their homework.”

“I’ve seen you prepare your coffee like that before, so I ended up learning how to make it myself...”

“Your memory is freakishly good. I wonder why it’s not the same—” he quickly cut himself off. He was about to say, *with cooking*. Judging by Fuyuka’s progressively sulking expression, this was a prudent choice on his end. “... I mean! You’re really good at making coffee,” he frantically added as he scrambled to change the conversation.

Unfortunately, it didn’t seem as though he was successful. Fuyuka eyed him suspiciously and said, “I feel like you were about to say something entirely different...”

“Me? Nah, you’re imagining things. Why would I—”

“I knew it. It was something rude, wasn’t it? I won’t get angry with you... Just be honest with me.”

“That’s what they all say before all hell breaks loose!” he exclaimed. *Now I’m positive she’ll freak out if I tell her... I’ve gotta resist, no matter how relentless she is!*

As if conveniently timed, his phone came to his rescue. The electric ringtone began to echo throughout the room.

“I believe that would be your phone,” Fuyuka pointed out.

“Looks like someone’s calling me. Could you excuse me for a sec?”

“Of course. Take your time,” she assured him. At the same time, though, she stared at him with the piercing gaze of a predator that had lost the chance to lunge at its prey.

Asahi feared for his well-being, so he left in a hurry and rushed for another room with the phone in his hand. He leaned against the door and checked the caller’s ID, and another sigh escaped him.

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“That was rather quick... I’m assuming it was your mother?” Fuyuka asked.

“Guess I was too loud, huh? Yeah, it was.”

“You could have taken your time if you wanted...”

“Nah, it’s okay. It wasn’t really a big deal,” he assured her with a shrug. The call between Asahi and his mother hadn’t lasted long. When he’d returned to the living room, he was met with a somewhat-dejected Fuyuka. It seemed that she was particularly conflicted after she’d heard their discussion.

Now that I think about it... Fuyuka always looks sad whenever her family’s mentioned, he recalled. He suspected that she had issues with her family based on the way she talked about them and her solitary living situation, but they were nothing but mere assumptions.

Can’t say I’m not interested in her past, but I don’t exactly want to make her feel uncomfortable either, he thought. This was Asahi’s particular way of being considerate toward Fuyuka. He didn’t believe that it was necessary to press her when she would rather not talk about it. Although their friendship had brought them closer, they still had a considerable ways to go.

One day, when she felt comfortable enough around him, he hoped that she would open up. Still, he couldn't bring himself to leave her looking so depressed.

"I'm being serious!" he insisted. "She just called to tell me to reply to the message she sent yesterday."

"A message?"

"Yeah, here. Take a look," he said as he whipped his phone out and handed it to her. There wasn't anything he'd feel embarrassed to show other people so he figured it was okay if Fuyuka saw it.

"I've secured a reservation for you for Christmas Eve. Why don't you drop by the restaurant and bring a date?" it read. The text had been the main perpetrator behind Asahi's bleak mood the day before.

"'The restaurant'? Is it the same one you told me about before?" she said as she looked over the message with curiosity.

"That's the one. It's called 'Soleil Levant,' if you've ever heard of it."

"Soleil... Levant...?" she asked in apparent surprise.

"Oh, so you've heard of it?"

"Heard of it? Wasn't that the restaurant that recently acquired its third Michelin star?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Your parents must be extremely talented..."

It wasn't the first time somebody had praised Asahi's parents—he recalled Chiaki and Hinami echoing similar sentiments in the past. In all honesty, it had never truly felt real to him. Even though the person he was just on the phone with was renowned as a top-notch patissier, it was still his mother at the end of the day—not to mention a woman who was incredibly difficult to please.

"Now that you mention it... was this the reason why you began living on your own?" Fuyuka asked.

"Bingo. They've been super busy ever since they received that third star."

"I'm sure it was quite an inconvenient time to receive one—particularly for you."

"My dad was crying and smiling at the same time when we first heard the news."

Asahi vividly recalled how overjoyed his father had been when they had first heard about it. Still, he had also felt heartbroken that he would be

forced to live away from his son. Asahi would've preferred if his father had picked one or the other—elation or sadness—instead of the bizarre, contorted expression he'd worn, but it seemed that the many intricacies of being a father eluded Asahi for the time being.

"You must have a fantastic father," she marveled with a small smile. Her eyes darted back to the phone before she added, "I'd suggest replying to that message as quickly as possible. You've already settled on an answer, haven't you?

"You're right. I'll tell her I'm going to pass n—"

"You're not going to accept?"

"You've been awfully excited for a while now. What's going on?" he asked cautiously.

"W-Well, it's not everyday that you receive an invitation to dine at a three Michelin star restaurant! I can't believe you're planning on turning it down..." she protested.

"I get what you're saying, but it's really awkward for me to show up at my parents' restaurant. I don't have anyone to invite either," he explained. He, regrettably, didn't have a girlfriend to spend Christmas Eve with. If last year—and the one before—were any indication, Chiaki and Hinami would spend it practically stuck to each other. Asahi always enjoyed the festivities with his family, a fact that his mother was all too aware of. Every year around this time, she would send the exact same message, word for word, to her ever-lonely son. And, every year, it never failed to dampen Asahi's spirits.

Can't exactly ask Fuyuka to go with me either... he thought to himself. The implications of going out at night on Christmas Eve were already there, and his mother's demand to bring a "date" only added fuel to the fire. There was no doubt that Fuyuka would be conscious of such a fact. Asking her to accompany him could very well jeopardize the friendship they'd spent so much time building. That was why Asahi was dead-set on rejecting his mother's incredibly unwelcome offer.

However, it seemed that Fuyuka was there to present him with a new choice he would have never considered. "Why don't I accompany you?" she offered as her shoulders quivered.

"*You*? Go with *me*?" he asked in surprise.

"Of course. Who else but you?" she responded. Her reply was clear-cut, but it didn't do much to dispel Asahi's confusion. "Is that a 'no'? I guess

that’s to be expected, seeing as I don’t fall under the category of a ‘date’...”

“I think we should put that to the side for now,” he hastily said, still dumbfounded by Fuyuka's sudden proposal. When he stared into her upturned eyes, however, he made up his mind once and for all. “You know what? Let’s do this thing. If you’re still up for it, that is.”

“O-Of course! With pleasure!” she exclaimed, her eyes aglow with joy.

Seeing her so enlivened made Asahi feel all warm and fuzzy inside. His contentment soon turned to embarrassment when he recalled the contents of his mother’s message, however. It appeared as though Fuyuka shared the same sentiment, as she quickly reverted to her typical composed demeanor and hung her head in complete silence.

Crap, it’s gotten awkward now... I gotta think of something else to say, he panicked. Suddenly, an idea flashed through his mind, and he continued, “Oh yeah. Are you even free on the 24th? Rumor is you’re pretty popular among the guys. Didn’t a bunch of them ask you out already?”

“They did, but I’ve politely rejected every single one,” she answered.

“I see. Guess I should’ve seen that one coming,” he said as he mentally offered a quick prayer for the fallen soldiers.

He concluded that his unsuccessful peers had approached her in order to get on good terms with her before the extended holiday started. Time was of the essence for them—they had little time to secure dates before finals and holidays, so they would often go all-out right prior to exams. This year’s prime target was apparently the elusive and untouchable “Ice Queen.”

Her popularity had clearly increased even more, if such a thing was possible, after her stellar performance during the sports festival. That, in addition to rumors about her icy nature thawing, served as the confidence booster some guys were seeking. Even those who would have never dreamed of asking her out beforehand had approached her. He’d heard about it from Chiaki—an irritating smirk plastered on his face—on multiple occasions.

While it was true that the harsh, frigid aura that surrounded her had lightened somewhat, she was still locking her heart away from others. In Asahi’s eyes, it was hard to believe that the very same Fuyuka was so willing to spend Christmas Eve with him. It seemed that there would be throngs of heartbroken boys for the foreseeable future.

“I’m quite excited for Christmas Eve,” she said with an innocent smile, her cheeks tinged with a faint trace of red. Asahi knew that they were only

going out as friends, and nothing more. Still, his heart couldn't help but pound with anticipation at the prospect of spending the holiday with Fuyuka.

"We gotta focus on passing the exams first," he said in an attempt to waive off the ticklish feeling of embarrassment. *I'll drink some coffee to calm myself down,* he mused as he downed his cup in a single gulp. Somehow, the mere thought that Fuyuka was the one who had prepared it for him in particular made the coffee taste just that little bit sweeter than usual.

Chapter Fourteen

Christmas Eve

"Yo Asahi, hook me up with a way to get better grades."

"Have you tried the controversial method of 'studying hard'?"

"... Any other suggestions?"

"I'm not a miracle worker. Studying is the only way."

"Y-You've gotta be kidding me..." Chiaki grumbled in a depressed tone.

The closing ceremony had just ended, and Asahi and Chiaki were sitting in the corner of their classroom. One would expect the latter to be over the moon now that winter vacation had officially started, but his expression was the exact opposite of delighted.

There wasn't much that could wipe the smile off of Chiaki's face, so there must have been a substantial reason for his grim expression. The answer lay in the paper he was holding—his report card. He'd received shockingly terrible grades—to the point that a teacher would likely faint on the spot upon witnessing it. He was easily below the average in each and every subject. Still, Chiaki wasn't the type to get discouraged by a few low marks. The problem was the big red circle on his report card, which signified that he would be forced to take supplementary classes for the subjects he had failed.

"I never thought this day would come..." he lamented.

"On the contrary, given how much you've been slacking, I'm almost shocked you've never flunked a class up until now. You know, this could finally be your wake-up call. Maybe now you'll spend your time studying instead of flirting around with Hanami all the time," Asahi said.

"Might as well tell me to go jump off a bridge, man."

"Come on, it can't be *that* bad," he tried to assure his friend. Chiaki was having none of it, though, as he practically melted into a dejected heap on his desk. He looked depressed and genuinely regretful that he'd failed a class. Still, these were the consequences of his actions—or lack thereof—so Asahi didn't feel a particular reason to comfort his friend.

"You've gotta put in the effort if you want to get better grades. There's no other way around it," he stated.

"I guess you're right... Can't argue with someone who broke into the top 10," Chiaki replied.

“I’m going home if you’re just gonna make fun of me.”

“Nonono, wait! I’m just takin’ the piss, you tosser! I’m impressed,” he joked with a ridiculous fake British accent. Chiaki had taken a peek at Asahi’s sheet and noticed his excellent marks—they were well above the class average. The marks that had particularly stood out to him were the impressive ones Asahi had managed to get in two of his weakest subjects: Math and English. It was obvious that his average had significantly increased thanks to those two improvements. He’d even managed to break the record he had set for himself from the previous exams. And this could all be traced back to his great tutor.

“Do people get better grades if somebody helps them out with their studying?” Chiaki mused.

“What do you mean?” Asahi asked.

“You were the one telling me about it back when I asked you about the secret of getting good grades, remember?”

Asahi was momentarily stunned at Chiaki’s incredibly perceptive question, but he couldn’t deny that his friend’s spirits seemed lifted compared to just a moment ago. Finally, he replied, “Wipe that smirk off your face.”

“Why so serious? I’m just wondering how my good pal Asahi started getting great grades, is all.”

“I’m going home,” he muttered after a pause for dramatic effect.

“Come on, dude! Hold up—“

“Chii-pie, I’m here! Wha? Didn’t know you were here too, Asahi.”

Asahi was about to stand up and leave until a bright and cheerful voice echoed throughout the room. The few remaining stragglers in the classroom —all of them boys—threw jealous and resentful glares at the couple.

“You got plans for later, too? Like, oh, I don’t know... a *date*?” Hinami asked.

“Nah, he was just chilling here with me until you came along, Hina.”

“You sure? But there’re rumors that—“

“Hold the thought, Hina! He ain’t exactly in the greatest mood today!” Chiaki yelled as he covered her mouth, rendering the remainder of her sentence a jumble of incoherent mumbles. This innocent display of intimacy attracted even more intense glares from the onlookers. Although Asahi had grown accustomed to such a scene, he could still slightly sympathize with his classmates.

There was a reason behind the spike in hostility. It was the day of the closing ceremony and the day their exam results had been handed back, sure... But most importantly, it was the day of the holy night—Christmas Eve.

"Welp, this is it. See ya next year, Asashi," Chiaki said.

"For sure," Asahi replied.

"Let's go visit the shrine together at the start of the year, okay?"

"Sure, I'll keep my schedule free," Asahi replied. And with that, the obnoxious couple went their own way. It wasn't even noon yet, but the two had already made plans to wander around the city until the sun had set. They left still wearing their school uniforms. This was apparently so they could make something special out of wearing their normal clothes on Christmas Day.

A date, huh? Asahi thought to himself. The word briefly sprang into his mind before it vanished just as quickly. What Hinami had said to him wasn't entirely false—he did indeed have plans for that evening. Unfortunately for his two friends, it wasn't by any stretch of the imagination a genuine date. It was an unwelcome dinner reservation pushed onto him by his parents. Such were Asahi's musings as he gazed upon the clear sky. His mind swirled with a variety of thoughts as he set home so that he wouldn't be late for the "date" with his "friend."

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Asahi returned home and took a quick shower. After that, he opened his wardrobe to choose his attire for the evening. He picked out a white shirt with a standing collar, a tailored navy jacket, trousers made of chino cloth, a heavy coat to protect against the harsh winter winds, and a pair of brand-new shoes. When he looked at himself in the mirror, he was—dare he say it?—looking rather dapper.

I don't look weird in this, do I? he thought to himself as he styled his hair with some hair gel. He was just finishing adding the final touches when the doorbell rang. His "date" had finally arrived.

The chime of the bell, a sound he was all too familiar with, struck anxiety in his heart. He placed his hand on his chest and felt his heart racing a mile a minute. It was clear he was nervous. No matter how hard he tried,

he was unable to calm himself down. After a series of deep breaths, he was able to regain at least a fraction of his composure. He walked up to the door and opened it, only to find Fuyuka in a dress that was in stark contrast to her standard attire.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," she said in a clear voice which was carried along by the soft gust of the night breeze. Asahi was at a loss of words; he was unable to look away from the beauty standing in front of him. She was wrapped up in a gray fur stole around her neck and a collarless pink coat. Underneath that, she had properly adhered to the restaurant's dress code by donning an elegant satin dress. The garment was stunning—brilliant, yet so subtle that it blended perfectly with the curtain of the night. It contrasted quite well with her porcelain skin, which was as mysterious as unchartered snow. The hem of her skirt swayed gently against the mischievous gusts of wind, which occasionally allowed one to get a peek of her long, slender legs.

"Beautiful," he said, unable to hold in his true thoughts. Her splendor was truly a sight to behold. As befitting of someone nicknamed "The Ice Queen," she boasted a mature beauty with a touch of youthful cuteness. Asahi, despite his best efforts, was left completely slack jawed by her elegance.

"Th-Thank you very much..." she whispered in a trembling voice as she looked downward. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, and her hands, which contained her purse, shook faintly. Her innocence served as an arrow that had pierced Asahi's heart. There was only one word that occurred to him when he saw how flustered she was: adorable. Before he could tell her as much, though, she hesitantly spoke up again.

"I-I think that you look quite fashionable, as well, Asahi..." she complimented him with the same quiet hesitation as before. Her cheeks were now visibly flushed.

"Thanks," he mumbled after pausing for a second. He hadn't expected a compliment from *her*, so his reply came across as rather clumsy and blunt... Although it was true that he struggled to find a way to respond to it. It wasn't long before the realization of what he had just told her hit him. He was washed by a wave of embarrassment.

This isn't a romantic date. We're not a couple. I'm only accepting this invitation so I can get my parents off my back, he assured himself in an attempt to calm himself down. "Shall we go now?" he added.

“By all means,” she replied after a short pause. It had only taken her a few seconds to respond to his question; though, for some reason, they had felt like an eternity for Asahi.

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It would take more than an hour to reach “Soleil Levant,” the restaurant which his parents managed. Two train rides were required to reach it. By the time they had arrived at the final station, the sun had already set, and the sky had been replaced by a starry veil.

“Do we turn here?” Fuyuka asked.

“Yeah.”

Smiling couples roamed the brilliantly lit streets. Amidst the bustling crowd, a pair of teenagers were the only source of quiet. Their conversations on the swaying train primarily consisted of discussing their test results, what they had talked about the previous evening, and so on. Now, other than the occasional inquiry about directions, they were both completely silent. Fuyuka wasn’t the talkative type by nature, and the same could be said about Asahi. Still, that didn’t stop the creeping feeling of discomfort that had become common for them whenever this situation arose.

“Did you look up the directions beforehand?” he continued.

“I did not.”

It was only a matter of minutes before they would arrive at their destination, but Asahi couldn’t bear the silence any longer and wanted to clear the awkwardness in the air. Luckily for him, Fuyuka felt the same way. She’d been fumbling around for a topic herself before he spoke up.

She slowed down and explained, “I’ve been to Soleil Levant once before when I was a child.” Asahi was surprised initially, but it made sense. It would explain why she was so knowledgeable about the restaurant, as well as why she was so keen to accompany him.

It must be quite the special place for her, he thought. Enough so that she was willing to go through the hurdle of going out with a guy—on Christmas Eve, no less—in order to visit it again.

“I still recall it quite vividly—this road, the restaurant, the food. Everything,” she added.

“That’s impressive. Your memory is the real deal.”

“It’s... a precious memory I have of my family. That must be the reason why I still remember it so fondly,” she replied with a complicated expression. The warm recollections of a distant past ushered feelings of nostalgia in her eyes, but there was also a tinge of depression. Asahi wasn’t sure if her gloomy expression was just an illusion brought upon by the darkness, or if a serious, agonizing memory was weighing on her heart. For whatever reason, he couldn’t help but feel that it was the latter.

So she does look sad when she talks about her family. This isn’t the first time that’s happened, he thought to himself. He wanted to ask her more about this precious memory of hers. Although he generally avoided bringing up her family, this question in particular may have been acceptable since it involved his parents’ restaurant. In the end, however, he simply ended up stating, “We’re getting close.”

“Indeed,” she replied.

As they continued to walk, Asahi heard a whisper among the clamor of the crowd. “I hope the soup still tastes the same...” It was a distinctive voice, one that was impossible for him to miss—especially since it came right from beside him. It was Fuyuka’s voice. Something was fundamentally different about it, however. It lacked the usual formal tone he had gotten so accustomed to, so he figured she was just talking to herself.

“I think it’s still the same... probably,” he answered.

“Y-You heard me just now?”

“It would be weird if I didn’t. I’m literally right next to you.”

Fuyuka was flustered, as evident by the bright red color that tinged her cheeks. Her bashful expression caused Asahi to break into a smile.

They walked down streets teeming with young couples. With every step they took, the distance between them began to close. They were now at a distance where their hands threatened to brush against each other with even the slightest of movements. Their general proximity, in addition to the overall sappy atmosphere emanating from the town, did little to quell their embarrassment.

“My parents made it so that soup is served with every course. Apparently it’s because it was the first dish they ever made together,” Asahi added.

“I never knew it had such a moving story behind it...”

“Lucky you, getting to eat your favorite soup,” he teased her in order to calm his racing heart. The soup made at Soleil Levant featured eggs as its main ingredient. He was slightly worried that all the food he’d made for her so far had been juvenile, between the omelets he’d made for lunch and the omelet rice he’d prepared for dinner. Eggs certainly seemed to be a main theme.

“Yes, I can barely contain my happiness,” she replied earnestly with a gentle grin, contrary to his expectations. He thought he had gotten used to seeing her smile by now, but it still threw him for a loop each time she did.

“Oh, I can see it in the distance now,” she said, pointing at the signboard as her expression melted into a smile once more. She hastened toward their destination, leaving Asahi trailing behind her. As he watched the excitable girl rush to their destination, a certain warmth filled his body... one that was different from the coat shielding him against the chilly weather.

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They arrived at the entrance of the restaurant. Its exterior was rather plain and unassuming, reminiscent of a rustic cafe. Based on the formidable nature of the worn wooden door in front of them, they were about to journey into a brave new world. The restaurant—in direct contrast to the urban glitz of the cityscape just outside—was decorated in lush greens. The restaurant practically screamed “organic,” save for one noticeably unnatural feature: a massive chandelier, which hung from the center of the restaurant, served as the sole source of light in the otherwise dim room. It could be compared to rays of sunlight passing through the thick boughs of a forest.

It was Soliel Levant, the restaurant with three Michelin stars and a haven for everything French cuisine related. It also served as a second home for Asahi, regardless of the fact that he hadn’t visited it for years. As soon as he walked into the restaurant, he noticed that not much had changed at all. His mind wandered; distant memories and nostalgia started to surface. He specifically recalled his father’s broad smile. Unfortunately, unpleasant memories surfaced, as well—he thought of his mother, a woman who was always difficult to read, and his face tensed up inadvertently.

Please, God, let this night end peacefully, he prayed as he walked up to the reception desk to check his reservation with the host. While the host

looked through the list, Asahi's mind went blank. He found himself whispering in a voice that was inaudible to anyone but himself, "I'm here with a friend. Just a friend."

The message he'd sent to his mother had been, word for word, the exact same sentence. It was the truth, plain and simple, stated as frankly as possible. He was confident that she wouldn't be able to jump to any problematic conclusions with that wording. At any rate, he wasn't holding his breath on the possibility of meeting his parents, especially considering it was the busiest time of the season for their establishment. In theory, they wouldn't be able to leave their respective stations for the night, or so Asahi continued to assure himself repeatedly.

Fuyuka was eagerly taking in her surroundings. Her innocent eyes were that of an excited child in a toy store. It was so heartwarming that it even made Asahi relax, even if only slightly.

"Hasn't changed one bit, right?" he asked.

"Indeed. It's just as I remember it," she replied with a faint smile. The sorrowful expression she'd worn just a few moments ago had completely vanished. Asahi was grateful to see that—if their night out would help her to recall pleasant memories, then it would have all been worth the trouble.

"Oh yes, Mr. Asahi Kagami. Right this way, please."

Asahi and Fuyuka left their coats and any personal belongings at the entrance. As Asashi was removing his outer coat, a distinctive glint caught Fuyuka's eye. There was something special on his blazer—something radiant and ruby red.

"Could this be...?" she asked while staring at his chest with curiosity.

"Yeah, thought it'd be a waste not to wear it," he answered with his eyes averted. It was the brooch Fuyuka had essentially forced upon him. He figured he should at least put it to use somehow rather than having it sit around on a stand and collect dust. However, wearing it proved to be more embarrassing than he'd initially expected.

"It suits you quite well."

"Thanks," he replied to Fuyuka's compliment after some hesitation. His face, ears, and neck started to turn a similar red to the brooch he wore.

They were escorted to their table, which was adjacent to the window. Everything was going well so far... besides one little problem.

"Why are the seats arranged in this way, I wonder...?" Fuyuka whispered as Asahi heaved an exaggerated sigh.

Normally, they would be seated facing each other. For some reason, however, the seats that accompanied the round table were placed next to each other. Honest to the French theme of the restaurant, the table was already prepared in advance. Show plates, napkins, cutlery, and glasses were spread out so that the dining sets were laid out next to each other. Asahi deduced that it had been done this way on purpose.

“My sincerest apologies. The chef requested that the table be set up in this manner,” the young host explained, then walked away.

Fuyuka was confused—understandably so. Asahi, who had figured it all out, hung his head in disappointment.

“Wasn’t the chef your father, Asahi?” Fuyuka asked.

“Future father-in-law here! You called?” a voice called out from behind them.

“E-Eek!” she shrieked and took a few steps back as a large man appeared behind them. “You... surprised me...”

“I knew you were behind this, Dad!” Asahi cried.

“Hm? Did you just call him ‘Dad’?” Fuyuka asked.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Kazuaki Kagami. I’m a full-time father and a chef on the side,” he introduced himself with a smile as bright as the white chef’s uniform he wore. He stood out rather prominently, especially against the black attire the garçons had to wear. Then again, his father would’ve stood out regardless—it was his restaurant, after all.

Sure enough, whispers between guests soon turned into a commotion when the world-renowned chef appeared. Those with wine glasses held them up high to toast him.

“I’m sorry for entering the dining room, ladies and gentlemen. I couldn’t simply stay in the kitchen when I saw my son with a cute girlfriend in tow. I just had to rush out to meet her,” he addressed the crowd.

“Hey! What are you—” Asahi began to protest, but his father cut him off.

“I'll speak to them for a bit, then return to my post. Oh? You want my signature? My apologies, that's not included on the menu!”

The restaurant, which had been quiet and peaceful just a moment ago, had changed drastically when his enthusiastic father had walked into the dining room. With a demeanor as brilliant as the glowing sun, it was obvious to see that he was rubbing off on the patrons. There was a smile on everyone's face, and they didn't seem to mind his intrusion in the slightest.

The bizarre scene only served to show how popular Asahi's father really was.

"Have a seat, you two. Don't be shy. Let's have a little chat!" Kazuaki, ever the gentleman, said while he pulled out a chair for Fuyuka to sit in. A sizable smile was plastered on his face. "And what might your name be, Miss?"

"I-I am Fuyuka Himuro," she replied somewhat timidly.

"Ooh, so you're that Himuro? Thank you for helping my son out so much recently."

"On the contrary, sir—I'm the one indebted to him."

"Isn't she just a doll? A polite young lady through and through. You've got yourself a keeper here, Asahi. The future of the Kagami household is safe and sound," he said with a hearty, bellowing laugh that resounded throughout the room.

Poor Fuyuka was no match for his vigor, and she looked to Asahi for help. Unfortunately, he could do little but shake his head. Once his father got excited about something, there was no virtually stopping his burning spirit. It was completely out of his hands. In fact, there was only one person on Earth who was up to the task. Still, he attempted to calm Kazuaki down. "Come on, Dad, let's dial it down a bit. You're scaring the girl."

"Am I? My apologies, Miss. I must have gotten carried away when I saw how pretty you are," he replied.

"Look, there's been a misunderstanding," Asahi said. "Let's get something straight—we're not a couple."

"Then why are you blushing, Asahi? You too, Himuro. Goodness, you two are just so pure and innocent. It reminds me of when I was young. Those were the days. Hahaha!" he exclaimed with another loud laugh. Despite Asahi's best efforts, the man could not be tamed. He'd hoped that "The Ice Queen" could help him cool down with her frigid, piercing stares, but Fuyuka was overwhelmed. She was hanging her head and trembling slightly.

"I'll return to the kitchen soon. Just bear with me for now, okay?"

"Y-Yes, sir..." Fuyuka managed to squeak.

Although he was an overbearing middle-aged man who refused to stay quiet, he was still a much-revered master chef who ran a famous restaurant. As a result, his personal time was indeed limited—especially because it was

their busiest time of the year. Still, the few minutes they spent with him felt like the longest Asahi had ever experienced in his life.

"So tell me, Himuro," Kazuaki continued, undeterred. "What exactly do you like about Asahi?"

"Err... um, well..." she faltered.

"I would love to hear how the sparks began to fly between the two of you. You see, Asahi's never had a girlfriend before. You could say I'm extremely interested."

"U-Um, it's not that... hmm..."

Fuyuka was being completely toyed with as his father barraged her with an endless onslaught of questions. She tried her best to clear the misunderstanding, though she was no match against a persistent Kazuaki.

"You look exactly like Toko, actually. Guess guys are naturally attracted to women that resemble their mother," he said. He was just pulling answers out of thin air now and only riling himself up.

Fuyuka and Asahi looked at one another. They were practically begging for something—anything—to happen so he could return to the kitchen.

That was when *she* appeared.

"Be quiet, Kazuaki."

A monotone voice rang throughout the room. It was so distinct that it could be heard even over the classical music in the restaurant. They all looked to the source of the commanding voice. Fuyuka was bewildered, Asahi had a sour expression, and—most shocking of all—the once-zealous Kazuaki had practically deflated on the spot.

"Oh... Yes. Sorry, dear," Kazuaki replied.

"Get back to the kitchen. We need you," the voice commanded.

"Huh? Can you give me three more minutes?"

"Did I stutter?"

"Ma'am! Yes, Ma'am!"

It was clear who wore the pants in their relationship based on their short exchange. Kazuaki made a rather quick retreat, tail tucked firmly between his legs, back to the holy ground of any chef. He looked somewhat pathetic and strangely unreliable. Still, once he resumed his work, the flames of his passionate personality would be rekindled once more. Therefore, Asahi wasn't too worried about him.

As humorous as his reaction had been, the situation was far too heavy for them to laugh. The woman who had quickly extinguished the wildfire

known as Kazuaki stood in front of them, and she didn't seem very happy.

"Pleasure to meet you. My name is Toko Kagami," she said flatly.

There was no follow up; she wasn't interested in making any small-talk. Asahi could almost hear her voice continuing, "I'm a full-time mother and a patissier on the side," though he quickly shook that illusion off. His mother was, and always has been, straight to the point. She gave the bare minimum introduction with no trace of inflection in her voice. Asahi took a quick peek at her face—sure enough, it was devoid of any emotion. He sighed. Another woman with a detached and cold personality that could rival Fuyuka's had entered the scene.



According to Toko, the unusual seating setup was a result of Kazuaki's arbitrary request. He wanted to see Asahi and his guest sit next to each other. He might have had good intentions, but it wasn't exactly commendable that he had abused his authority in the workplace. Asahi's other—and more logical—parent soon returned the setup in the way it was meant to be. Fuyuka and Asahi were now finally able to sit face-to-face.

Everything seemed to return to normal, save for the extra seat that Kazuaki had brought in order to sit next to them. It appeared as though Toko intended to stay with them for the time being.

"Aren't you busy?" Asahi asked.

"I'm on a little break. I'll get back to my work once it's over," she replied. She shifted her gaze toward Fuyuka and continued, "And what would you like me to call you?"

"Wh-Whatever is comfortable with you, Ma'am..."

"I see. I'll call you Fuyuka then."

Toko had managed to get on a first-name basis with Fuyuka with the briefest of formalities and an expressionless face. Asahi had no idea what she was plotting, but it was clear that she was confident in her plan.

Fuyuka, on the other hand, was all nerves. Her wandering eyes, stiff nods, tense expression, and jittery movements all betrayed her anxiety. Asahi couldn't blame her—they'd been hit with one surprise after another ever since they'd entered the restaurant. Not only had she withstood Asahi's hysterical and raucous dad, but now she had to deal with his emotionless mother. It only stood to reason that she would be on high alert at all times.

Asahi had learned to pick up on Fuyuka's minor shifts in behavior as a result of their time together. "You don't have to be so on edge with my mom, Fuyuka. She's the rational one. Sort of," he tried to assure her while he looked at his mother.

"'Sort of'?" his mother quoted him.

"W-Well, yeah! Sometimes you do... strange... things..." his voice trailed off as Toko shot him a venomous look, and he shriveled up in fear. He'd succeeded in making Fuyuka feel more comfortable, but it had come at a hefty price.

His mother hadn't changed one bit since his childhood. She'd always had a blank, emotionless expression as far as he could remember. It was so severe, in fact, that he could practically count the number of times he'd seen her smile on one hand. Naturally, he and his father were often exasperated

by her apathetic nature. It was a step up from fear, at the very least. God help the unfortunate soul that angered her, though—that was a different beast entirely.

"I'm willing to bet that you didn't even show Dad the message I sent you!" he continued.

"Correct. I thought it'd be funnier this way."

"Hope you enjoyed getting your sick kicks from seeing us tormented. Dad literally shouted at the top of his lungs that she was my girlfriend. In front of all the guests!"

"I don't see why you're complaining. She's pretty enough. You wouldn't mind if she were your girlfriend, right?"

"That's beside the point..." he protested. He could tell from her cold tone that she was purposefully poking fun at him, and he fully understood that he was playing right into her trap by continuing to challenge her.

While Toko rarely showed emotion on her face, Asahi had always been able to understand her thoughts and feelings through her actions alone. The most prominent example he could think of was when his parents had prepared their luggage to move out. When his mother had said her goodbyes, she'd given him a gentle hug before she walked out the door. She would always prepare a fine cake for his birthday, accompanied by presents. She would never forget to reward and praise him whenever he did well on a taxing exam, got first place in a sporting event, or any other sort of trivial accomplishment he achieved. Although she gave off the impression of being scary, strict, cold, and even hard to read at first glance, the truth was that the warmth of a loving mother was weaved into anything she did for her family. It was something that her family members, friends, and colleagues would come to understand the more time they spent with her.

Toko turned her attention to Fuyuka and asked, "What about you, Fuyuka? Did you feel uncomfortable when people thought you two were a couple?"

"H-Huh? Me? As Asahi's girlfriend? Um, well..." Fuyuka stammered.

"Hey, don't put her on the spot like that," Asahi protested.

"Calm down. I just want to apologize if I've offended her."

What Toko said made absolute sense... if she weren't the one who had orchestrated the whole situation to begin with. As he'd told his mom in his message, he and Fuyuka were nothing more than friends. By not showing her husband the message, Toko had just added fuel to the fire.

“So? What’s your answer, Fuyuka?” Toko prodded.

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, okay?” Asahi said in an effort to comfort her. Fuyuka was caught between a rock and a hard place—there was Toko, pressing her for an answer, and Asahi trying to persuade her to remain silent. After a short pause, she finally spoke up.

“I wouldn’t, um, mind it...” she said with a fragile voice, her head drooping in embarrassment.

“Oh my. Good for you, Asahi,” Toko said.

“Don’t drag me into this,” he grumbled. It was obvious that his mother, whom he hadn’t seen since the summer, was simply looking to tease her son.

I shouldn’t let what Fuyuka said get to me. Nobody would be able to deny anything in this situation, he thought.

“I told you in that message, and I’ll tell you again—we’re just friends. Right, Fuyuka?” he spoke up and turned to Fuyuka for confirmation.

“Y-Yes, indeed,” she replied with a tinge of hesitation. “Asahi is my... precious... precious... friend.” Her words were fragmented, and her voice dwindled as she continued. She slowly raised her head and met Asahi’s gaze, only to quickly avert her own.

His mother quickly latched on to this brief interaction. “Are you sure you’re ‘just friends’?” she asked.

“Yes. I’ve been telling you this for a while now,” Asahi insisted.

“But you call each other by your first names.”

“We’re just on very good terms.”

“Your face is red.”

“... You’re imagining things,” he waved her off and looked out the window to hopefully end the conversation. For now, it seemed that he’d managed to fend off her ruthless attack. He could faintly make out his reflection amidst the bright lights of the city. Just as his mother had said, his face was indeed flushed.

He stole a glance to his side and noticed Fuyuka was copying him. He was able to catch a glimpse of her face between the curtain of her black hair—her pale, nearly translucent skin was just as red as his. She looked gorgeous, and the sparkling city lights that illuminated the night sky and reflected off the window only accentuated her beauty even further.

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“Well then, I guess this is my cue to leave,” Toko said. Asahi and Fuyuka each breathed a sigh of relief. They looked away from the window and faced each other in what felt like the first time in a while. Asahi’s parents had had their fun tonight, but Asahi was now certain that he could finally relax.

Toko acted like she was about to stand up, but then suddenly pointed a slender finger at Asahi’s sparkling brooch and added, “By the way, seeing that thing takes me back.”

“Takes you back?” he asked.

“What do you mean, Ma’am?” Fuyuka wondered as well.

“That’s the prize given to the best player at the sports festival, isn’t it? I wonder if people still treat it as a charm to convey their feelings to someone they love.”

“Wh-Wha?! How do you know about that?” Asahi asked, completely dumbfounded.

“Simple—Kazuaki and I were the ones who started it. Our classmates always used to call me “ice-cold,” “difficult to approach,” and whatnot, but that didn’t stop your father. He confessed to me and gave me the brooch as a gift. One thing led to another, and we started dating. That’s when everyone at school made a commotion about the brooch and started the legend,” she explained as she indulged in memories of her adolescence. Asahi had heard from his parents that they attended the same school, but he would have never expected that they were the origins of the legend. Then again, he’d never actually bothered to ask how they got to know each other to begin with.

“So tell me, Asahi—who gave you that brooch?” his mother asked.

“Uh, well...” he hesitated, his eyes wandering around the room to avoid his mother’s inquisitive stare. His eyes accidentally met with Fuyuka’s for a brief moment, but that was all it took for his mother to reach a conclusion to her question.

“The legend of the brooch is real, Asahi. You’re living proof of that,” she said teasingly as she patted his shoulder. Toko finally stood up from her seat and continued, “Take good care of Asahi for me, will you, Fuyuka? I hope we can meet again someday. I feel like we’ll get along just fine.”

Toko headed back to the kitchen, leaving in her wake a flustered and dumbfounded Fuyuka. It looked as if Toko had taken a genuine liking to Fuyuka—she wasn't usually so talkative. While she did wear her standard serious expression throughout their conversation, Asahi had been able to detect the faintest hint of excitement in her voice.

"Sorry you had to go through that. My parents can be pretty annoying," Asahi apologized.

"Not at all. It was quite enjoyable."

"If you say so. I'm pretty much fed up with them at this point, honestly. God, I'm already exhausted."

Unexpectedly, Fuyuka let out an elegant laugh. She covered her mouth with one hand as she stared at the ceiling. "I can tell that your parents love you dearly, Asahi," she added.

"If your idea of love is making a mockery out of me, then sure. My dad was just going wild."

"I believe that's just proof of how much they cherish you," she explained. She looked up and asked in a charming voice, "'Soleil Levant' is French for 'sunrise,' isn't it?"

Asahi followed her gaze upward and took in the massive chandelier that illuminated the dimly-lit restaurant. He had heard the story from his father numerous times by this point. The chandelier was supposed to symbolize the most unique thing that lit up their life—their one and only son, Asahi. It was meant to convey the light of the soft morning sun—his namesake.

"Yeah, that's right," he replied. Asahi understood how much love his parents had for him. That was why he could never hate them, even with his father's rowdy antics or his mother's persistent teasing. While it wasn't the most conventional form of showing affection, it was nevertheless incredibly honest and sincere. It was no wonder that Fuyuka, who had just met them for the first time, was able to glean that much.

"Here you go sir, some 'amuse-bouche,'" a server who appeared beside Asahi said.

"Thank yo—Wait! What are you doing out here again?!" Asahi cried. He'd turned around to thank the server, only to discover that it was his father again.

"Your mother is right! It *is* the same brooch! I was so caught up in our chat that I never even noticed it! If she's the one who gave it to you, does it mean that you two'll end up getting marri—"

“Kazuaki, I don’t recall ever allowing you to leave your station,” a frigid voice called out.

“Ah. Yes, dear. I’m sorry,” he apologized pitifully as he was dragged back to the kitchen by the frosty patissier. The guests were quite amused by the outlandish scene. Asahi and Fuyuka just looked at each other and laughed.

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Asahi and Fuyuka were served a magnificent eight course meal: amuse-bouche, hors d'oeuvre, soup, fish, sorbet, entrée, dessert, and—finally—a small cup of coffee with petits fours on the side. Each and every dish had been nothing short of a true masterpiece and left nothing to be desired.

“That was incredibly delicious.”

“You said it. I don’t think I have the vocabulary to even begin to describe it.”

Asahi and Fuyuka continued to marvel over the great food long after they had left the restaurant. It was all they could talk about as they strolled the neon-infested city, as they rode the train back home, and as they walked back to their apartments.

“Can you cook like that too, Asahi?”

“Not even in my wildest dreams,” Asahi quickly said.

“That was a prompt reply...”

“I’m like a fledgling that’s just started learning to fly in the eyes of the pros. Comparing me to them is just plain ludicrous at this point.”

Although they might not have looked or acted the part, Kazuaki and Toko were elite chefs in their own right. Asahi might have been able to make something that looked similar to their dishes, but it would be tantamount to a cheap imitation of the original. There was no way his dishes could even hope to be as complex as theirs.

“If you believe it’s impossible with your skills, then it surely must be a pipe dream for me,” Fuyuka concluded.

“Was there something on the menu that you wanted to recreate?” Asahi asked.

“N-Not particularly...”

“It’s the tourin soup, isn’t it?”

“H-How did you know?”

“It’s written all over your face.”

It seemed that Asahi had hit the jackpot based on the amazed look on her face. She appeared to have taken his comment literally, however, as she quickly covered it with her hands. Seeing her innocent attempts at warding off any inquiring looks was nothing short of adorable, and it left Asahi feeling warm and fuzzy inside.

“What are you smiling about, Asahi?!” she asked as she glared at him from between her fingers.

“*Ahem*. Anyways, you sure do love eggs with your food, huh?” he said in an attempt to change the subject.

“Indeed, I do.”

“Is there a reason behind that?”

“A... reason?”

“Yeah. You never thought about why you like it so much?”

When asked about one’s favorite dish, just about anyone could easily answer the question. Generally, at least one prominent dish would come to mind. Explaining *why* they liked it, however, was an entirely different issue. It was one that most struggled to answer, surprisingly enough. People were born with certain preferences, and most tastes would be established and firmly rooted by childhood. In other words, Fuyuka liked it because—

“It was my mother's speciality. She used to make it fairly often for me when I was still a child. I’ve loved the taste of eggs ever since,” she muttered after a brief pause.

Asahi nodded in response. It was the same for him, as well—most of his favorite dishes could be traced back to what his parents had made for him growing up. He’d even felt a tinge of nostalgia when he enjoyed the exquisite food they had prepared for him today.

“The soup they make at Soleil Levant reminds me of my mother’s cooking. That’s why I would love to learn to cook it someday, but... that would likely be rather difficult, unfortunately,” she said, her face slackening into a weak smile. Asahi figured that she must be reminiscing over her childhood days spent enjoying her mother’s cooking. It was a gentle, delicate smile, yet Asahi noticed a modicum of grief and sorrow looming deep within.

Her mother used to make it for her when she was a kid, huh? Asahi thought to himself. A certain theory—one that he had been inadvertently

avoiding so far—started to take form within his mind. Upon this moment of realization, a timely northern gust of wind swept by, as if to confirm his suspicions. Fuyuka's smile would sometimes conceal sadness underneath, and it was only exclusive to when she talked about her past and her family.

"Something the matter, Asahi?" she asked.

"Hm? No, it's nothing. Don't worry about it," he replied after snapping out of his ruminations. Fuyuka was looking at him with concerned eyes. He collected his composure, calmed his wavering heart, and continued, "I know I was just saying that it's impossible to make a soup anywhere near as good as my parents'... but we can still give it a shot."

That particular tourin soup had a massive significance on Asahi's life, as well—not only was it the first dish that Asahi's parents had ever made together, but it was also the first dish that they had ever taught him how to make. While it was true that he could never hope to come close to replicating it, right down to the finest details, he was still confident that he could still make something that was similar enough.

"I could teach you next time if you'd like," he said.

"R-Really? You would do that for me?"

"Of course. They more or less taught me how to make it."

Fuyuka pulled her hands away from her face, and Asahi prepared himself for the worst. However, contrary to his expectations, her expression was brightening up in happiness. The girl in front of him was now smiling with joy. She was no longer "The Ice Queen" she once was, the girl who hid her emotions away behind a frosty façade. She was now a girl like any other, expressing herself through joy, sorrow, and everything in between. The most notable change, however, was that her once icy words were now finally beginning to show signs of warmth.

Perhaps that was why Asahi had been able to pick up on that gloomy expression she would sometimes make; the same way he was able to perceive that something felt off about her at that moment.

"Is everything okay with you?" he asked.

"H-Huh...?"

"You look like you're deep in thought about something."

Asahi had no evidence to support his claim. Call it intuition, perhaps. He could be wrong, for all he knew, but it seemed that he hit the bull's eye. Her eyes widened in surprise, and she slowed down as she tried to grasp the words that failed her.

“Well, you see...” she finally managed to explain. “I just remembered our agreement. You said you would teach me how to cook until we finished the final exams...”

While they had grown accustomed to eating dinner together, it was all because of their agreement to help each other out. Fuyuka would assist Asahi with his studies, and he would in turn help to improve her cooking skills. The former had achieved his goal by getting great results on his exams. The latter had barely had enough time to improve before the start of winter vacation. In other words, the end of exams also marked the end of their figurative contract. They would no longer have an excuse to meet up with each other again.

Now that Asahi was able to think more clearly about the matter, his heart ached with sadness. His fingers wandered aimlessly to the brooch, and he found himself tracing its outline. *Now that I think about it, she gave this to me on the same day we made that deal,* he recalled.

Neither said a word as they walked. As they finally approached their apartments, they both finally mustered up the courage to speak. Unfortunately, they both did so at the same time.

“Hey—” “Umm—”

They stopped dead in their tracks and stared at each other. The awkward silence was only punctuated by the whispering wind.

“Would you... continue to teach me how to cook properly, please? Though I would understand if you were to decline...” she mumbled. Her frail voice echoed in the otherwise silent street. She cast her eyes down, clearly afraid to hear Asahi’s answer.

He had already made up his mind. “You know, the food you’ve cooked so far has yet to impress me. And you *did* tell me you wanted to learn how to make that soup, so...”

“Does that mean...?” she asked expectantly.

“I’ll keep teaching you how to cook until you’re satisfied, Fuyuka.”

Fuyuka might have beaten him to the punch, but Asahi had planned to propose the exact same idea. After all, he could still vividly recall her determined smile when she’d said she would make him acknowledge her ability.

“Thank you so much, Asahi,” she said with a grateful smile. Her expression of happiness was far from novel at this point, but it never failed

to make his heart skip a beat. The gloomy clouds that covered his heart dispersed, and he was now enveloped by a pleasant warmth.

"Well then, may I visit you tomorrow morning?" Fuyuka asked.

"I don't mind at all. It's Christmas tomorrow, so why don't we go all out?"

"Sounds great. This is going to be so much fun."

"Don't expect too much, okay? It's gonna be a step down from what we had tonight," he warned her.

"Don't worry. I'm still excited for it," she replied. "I've... taken a liking to your cooking, after all."

"Have you now?"

"Yes, I have," she replied, her cherry red lips forming into a grin.

She was so dazzling that it was genuinely hard to look at. Asahi wanted to avert his eyes and focus his attention on walking down the road, but Fuyuka was, once again, just that one step ahead of him.

"I'll see you tomorrow then," she concluded as she briskly walked to the entrance of the complex. It might've been Asahi's imagination, but he could've sworn that her ears were slightly redder than usual.

God, I hope I'm not blushing, too, he thought to himself. Their farewell had been sudden, but Asahi felt relieved nonetheless. His heart couldn't handle any more surprises that night. He was finally alone on this chilly December night. It was time for some inward reflection—why had he been so unusually terse and silent?

I must've been too self-conscious of Fuyuka tonight, he thought. Who could have blamed him? Fuyuka had been incredibly charming in her dress, and she'd revealed a side to him that no one had ever seen before.

It was the holiest of nights—an occasion that only occurred once a year—but his mind kept wandering back to Fuyuka. He contemplated why his heart was beating so rapidly. An idea came to mind, but it was promptly scrapped. He shook his head in denial, telling himself over and over again that it couldn't possibly be true. The winter's freezing winds beat at his bare cheeks. Yet, for some curious reason he couldn't understand, it didn't feel as cold as he'd expected.

Chapter Fifteen

Christmas

It was finally the 25th of December—Christmas Day. Asahi and Fuyuka were having dinner together, as they had promised the night prior. The table had a lavish smorgasbord worthy of being called a feast: roast chicken that they had picked up at the supermarket, roast beef, cream stew, and prosciutto salad. It had taken them a considerable amount of time and effort to cook their dinner, but it had been more than worth it in the end. Every single dish turned out to be exquisite.

"Wait a moment, please," Fuyuka said as she left the apartment to return to her room. They had just finished washing the dishes, but it appeared as though Fuyuka still had something planned for the night. Asahi found this peculiar. Now that they were on winter break, they didn't have to worry about schoolwork for a while. In other words, there was no particular reason for Fuyuka to stay any longer than was necessary.

Asahi stared blankly around his apartment. There was practically a large question mark hovering over his head as he contemplated what Fuyuka had up her sleeve.

After a while, the door to his apartment opened once again. Brisk footsteps echoed through the hall, followed by a voice that was just as lively. "Let's go onto the balcony, Asahi!" Fuyuka called out to him.

"H-Huh?"

"No time to waste! A beautiful scene awaits us!" she joyously exclaimed as she blew past him into the living room and opened the curtains in one swift motion. It was already pitch black outside, but the veil of darkness was thwarted by the occasional inkling of moonlight peeking through the clouds. The hazy illumination of the street lights and houses, in addition to the bustling neon lights of the distant cityscape, punctuated the horizon. The otherwise inky canvas of the sky was coated in an abundance of colors. Among all the vibrant hues, one in particular stood out—the sharp, dazzling white of snow.

"You weren't kidding... It's breathtaking..." Asahi murmured, unable to contain his admiration for the astonishing scenery. Fuyuka seemed to be satisfied with his reaction, indicated by her mouth naturally curling up into a smile.

They both stood at the balcony and gazed up at the night sky. Everything, as far as the eye could see, was covered in a thick blanket of snow. It provided quite the intimate atmosphere for the couples walking about the city. Perhaps God himself was on the lovebirds' side this Christmas, bestowing upon them a gift from above, or so Asahi thought. Given the heavy snowfall, it was not exactly an outlandish assumption.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Fuyuka asked.

"Yeah. It's amazing," Asahi agreed. "Didn't the weather forecast say that it was going to be a white Christmas this year or something?

"They said it would be the first one in somewhere around a dozen years," she replied.

"Huh, for real? Go figure."

"You don't sound all that excited."

"Well, it *did* snow just last year, so..."

"It's snowing on *Christmas* this year. That makes it that much more special."

"Does it now?" he questioned, seemingly unconvinced.

"Yes," she answered. Her caramel colored eyes sparkled in excitement as she returned her attention to the unique cloak of white. Fuyuka was utterly enraptured by the snowscape around her, paying no heed to the fact that it was also one of the year's coldest nights.

I guess girls like this sort of romantic setting, Asahi thought. He pondered if Fuyuka's affection toward the snow was a result of the romance novels she had a habit of reading.

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"*Achoo*!"

A cute sneeze echoed around the room as Fuyuka, rather embarrassed, tried to muffle her subsequent sniffs. She had spent quite some time on the veranda wearing nothing but her loungewear to protect her from the cold, so it made sense that she had caught a chill. Even Asahi himself had let out a loud sneeze just a moment ago. He regretted not wearing a jacket. In his defense, they hadn't really had time to bundle up with how enthusiastically Fuyuka had rushed him outside. There was no use crying over spilled milk at this point, though.

“Here, this should warm you up a bit,” he said as he approached Fuyuka with a cup of hot milk in each hand. He sat down next to her on the sofa.

“Thank you very much,” she thanked him as she accepted it.

“So why did you return exactly? I thought we were done for the night once we did the dishes,” he asked.

“Ah... well...”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to talk about it. I won’t force you.”

“No, that’s not the case here... Could you wait for me again, please?” she requested as she stood up and made her way toward the entrance once more.

Asahi relaxed on the sofa, wrapping his hands around the steamy cup of hot milk in an attempt to seek warmth. He wasn’t sure why she had returned, but it was obvious that it wasn’t simply because of the snow. There must have been another reason—perhaps she had remembered something. As he pondered her motives, the pitter-patter of footsteps indicated that she was approaching him again.

“Could you close your eyes for me?” she pleaded.

“Like this?” he asked, complying with her request.

“Yes. Don’t open them until I tell you that you’re allowed to do so.”

Asahi had a flash of déjà-vu. Hinami had asked him to do the same once, then proceeded to flick her finger against his forehead. Of course, Fuyuka and Hinami were the epitome of polar opposites. He was probably safe from any unwarranted mischief... was what he tried assuring himself.

Asahi’s consciousness was thrown into a sea of darkness. His senses were now heightened, sensitive to the most miniscule of movements, and all too aware of Fuyuka’s close proximity. He had to fight the urge to open his eyes and see what she was planning. Before long, he felt a small, unfamiliar weight being placed on his lap.

“You can open your eyes now,” she said.

“What’s this?” he questioned. He examined the long, slender, rectangular box in front of him. It was neatly wrapped up in paper and adorned with festive red and green stripes. There was no real point to him asking—he had a good idea what it was.

“It’s your Christmas present. Merry Christmas.”

“Figured as much. God, sorry, I didn’t get you anything...” he groaned.

“Don’t worry about it. It was just a little something I was intending on doing for a while,” she explained with a faint, bashful smile and her head hung low.

“Can I open it?”

“Of course. I hope you like it...” she said with a troubled expression.

With her permission, he went ahead and undid the wrapping around the box. What emerged from underneath was something that Asahi never would have expected. It was a familiar-looking mechanical pencil; a spitting image of the high quality, elegant design that Asahi loved so much. The only difference was that this one had a black and silver metallic finish, as opposed to Asahi’s old pencil.

“This is the limited edition one, right? It’s pretty heavy on the wallet, I’ve heard,” he commented. This particular version of the pencil was a limited edition made to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the company that made it. As one could imagine, it was in high demand. It was so popular, in fact, that Asahi had completely given up on ever getting one. He had even tried searching for it on the internet once, but each listing had a hefty aftermarket price to go along with it. With Asahi’s frugal lifestyle, it was certainly well out of his budget.

Regardless of all the troubles he had faced trying to acquire it in the past, the mechanical pencil now sat in front of him. It sparkled proudly in a way particular to brand-new items.

“I saw how upset you were when your previous one broke right before the final exams, so I figured you’d be happy if I bought you this limited edition model...” Fuyuka explained hesitantly.

“It makes me happy that you care, but this must’ve cost a pretty penny. Are you really okay with giving me this?”

“Of course,” the little Santa assured him. “You’ve given me so much, so I wanted to give back, too... even if it’s only a little.”

“Have I really given you anything?” he asked suspiciously.

“Yes, more than you could imagine,” she said with a nod. Her cheeks were fully flushed.

Asahi racked his brain, but he couldn’t for the life of him remember a single time where he had presented Fuyuka with a gift himself. If anything, he was the one that had received the brooch she had oh-so-vehemently forced upon him. He *had* taken her to his parents’ restaurant, although that was more of a generous gift from his parents rather than him.

Whatever the case, it seemed that Fuyuka had her own feelings on the matter. While Asahi was still bewildered at the discrepancies in both of their memories, he had no reason to refuse her gift.

"Thank you. I'll make sure to take good care of it," he expressed his gratitude and was met by Fuyuka's gentle smile. *Has winter always been this hot?*

Asahi didn't understand why his heart was beating so rapidly, nor why his body felt especially warm. He noticed that his heart had started to quiver more and more often recently, particularly when he spent time with Fuyuka. The way it had just skipped a beat by meeting her eyes and seeing her smile only attested to that fact.

He averted his eyes and caught sight of the steam rising from their mugs. The vapor rose and flitted about in the air, dancing and intertwining together as the frigid draft of the winter night blew the two around.

After Story

Playing in the Snow with The Ice Queen

It was the day just after Christmas. Asahi, who had just been awoken by his alarm clock, quickly hopped out of bed and flung open his curtains.

“What a view...” he murmured to himself. Everywhere he looked, it was a world of white. It appeared as though it had snowed all throughout the night, as everything was blanketed by a thick layer of white. The peaks of snow outside glittered under the rays of the sun, forming a breathtaking kaleidoscope that shimmered faintly through his window.

“Guess I’ll go outside to check it out,” he decided. The cold outside was piercing—enough to make anyone reconsider leaving the comfort of their home. In the end, however, Asahi’s curiosity in regards to the snow prevailed. He ate a light breakfast, put on his coat, and opened the door to his apartment with excitement.

“God, it’s cold...” “It’s so cold...”

Two voices overlapped. Asahi turned in the direction of the sound and was met by the all-too-familiar curtain of jet black hair—it was Fuyuka.

“Ah...” “Oh...”

They stared blankly at each other for a brief moment, but soon recognized each other and smiled.

“Good morning,” she greeted him.

“Morning,” he replied.

Fuyuka trotted toward Asashi after they had exchanged greetings. Her long, black hair was partially tucked into her coat and covered by a scarf. What wasn’t hidden rippled in soft waves around her ears. She also wore earmuffs, a pair of gloves, and a fur-trimmed duffle coat. Everything she had on was the definition of fluffy; it gave her the appearance of a small, adorable animal.

“Did you... come out to see the snow, as well?” she asked.

“Yup. It’s been a while since it’s snowed this much. I’m psyched.”

“I feel the same. It’s very exciting in a way,” she said. She fell silent, appearing to be pondering something, before she spoke up once more. “Well, since we’re both here, would you like to play in the snow together?”

“Sounds great! Let’s go make a snowman in the nearby park!” he exclaimed nearly a nanosecond after the invitation had left her lips.

“Agreed! Let’s make it a huge one!”

Asahi and Fuyuka left the apartment complex. The winter sky above them was clear and crisp, and the road ahead of them was elegantly garnished in white. The snow underneath their boots played a symphony, letting out a satisfying squeak with every step they took. Their duet of lively conversation added another musical quality to their environment.

“Whoa, look at the clear trail of footsteps we’re leaving behind,” Fuyuka marveled.

“The snow’s so fresh that we could probably make some snow angels.”

“Shall we make some?” she suggested.

“Wait, wait, wait, hold up. That might sound like a good idea at first, but you’ll regret it once you get drenched,” he admonished.

As they made their way to the park, Fuyuka flashed an innocent, childlike smile every now and then. Asahi was delighted, as well—the mound of snow had rekindled a youthful spark and enthusiasm that called back to the little boy he once was. By the time they had reached their destination, they could barely contain their enthusiasm to play around in the snow.

“Now then, how big should our snowman be?” Asahi asked.

“What if we made it my height?” Fuyuka suggested after a pause.

“For real?”

“Of course not. That was just a joke,” she said with a mischievous grin.

“Phew, good. You sounded pretty serious there...” he said, breathing a sigh of relief.

“I was only half serious.”

“I knew it,” he replied, cracking a mischievous smile of his own. Fuyuka bashfully looked away from him. As a result of their conversation, they settled on the very ambiguous objective of making it as large as they possibly could. And so the two of them set out to find a spot that had enough snow to achieve the task.

“I’m going to focus on making its upper half. Can I count on you to take care of the bottom half, Asahi?”

“Okaaaay,” he agreed.

With his new role established, he squatted down. He began to gather any nearby snow with both hands, bringing in large heaps at a time, and morphed them into spherical lumps. He repeated the process several times, resulting in a number of medium-sized snowballs. After he had finished

making them, he took the balls and rolled them around on the ground to make them even bigger.

"It's picking up a lot of snow," he commented. "We'll be done in no time if we keep it up."

"The snow here has a lot of moisture in it, so it sticks together more easily," she explained.

"Wow, aren't you well-informed."

"I looked it up before I went outside."

"I knew you were excited, but not *this* excited," he said, admiring the amount of trivia Fuyuka retained about making snowmen. He continued to roll the snowballs until they were about up to knee height. Unfortunately, they wouldn't get much larger—it seemed that as the surface area of the snowballs increased, so did the amount of snow required to make it bigger.

"You know what? I take it back. This looks like it's gonna take a while. And all this bending over is making my back hurt," he complained.

"You sound like an old man."

"Do I now? Hmm, you don't sound tired at all."

"Yes. I'm still a highschool student, after all."

"But I'm a highschool student, too..." old man Asahi grumbled as he took a much-needed rest to stretch his back.

Fuyuka, on the other hand, was still brimming with energy. She continued to roll the head and torso around until they were the perfect size.

"I think that's more than enough, don't you think?" Asahi asked.

"Indeed. I think we just need to properly shape them, and then we'll be done," Fuyuka surmised as she scraped off excess snow.

Asahi continued to roll his portion of the snowman around, but exhaustion quickly crept up on him. It was no wonder—he was doing physical work in an awkward position he wasn't exactly used to, to say nothing of the chilly conditions.

"I'll help you," Fuyuka offered. Her bright voice spurred him on and encouraged him to continue.

"You're a lifesaver," he thanked her as he scooted over to the side to make room for her.

"This is the homestretch, so let's do our best!" she exclaimed with a faint smile. She pushed the snowball forward, and Asahi followed suit with everything he had. Their hands were practically on the verge of touching, and their eyes would meet every once in a while.

“This is quite fun,” she said.

“Sure is.”

Fuyuka was wearing the most dazzling smile, and it made Asahi’s lips curl up into a grin.

Despite the chill, the sun’s rays pierced through the thick gray winter clouds and allowed the Earth to bask in its relative warmth.

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“Our snowman is finished!” she shouted with a joyous voice. Her excitement rang across the otherwise silent park. There was only one thing that could catch her eye at that moment—the finished snowman that they had both worked so hard to build.

“Looks good to me. Very good,” Asahi added.

“Indeed. I’m quite satisfied with how it turned out,” she agreed.

They had used some buttons that Fuyuka had brought from her place to serve for the snowman’s eyes and nose. As for its mouth and arms, they had made use of some branches they had picked up around the park. It had been worth all the time and effort Fuyuka had spent fussing over the smaller details—the final result was perfect, pure and simple.

“So what are you gonna do with it now?” Asahi asked.

“I wonder... I would’ve loved it if I could take it home with me...” she replied with a hint of remorse.

“Uh...huh... Unfortunately, I doubt that’ll happen anytime soon.”

Fuyuka stood in place, seriously contemplating the logistics of making a miniature snowman that could fit into her freezer. Her train of thought was soon interrupted by a noisy set of footsteps that approached them. Eventually, the ones responsible for the din appeared right in front them. It seemed that a group of kids who lived in the neighborhood had come out to play—three lively young boys surrounded the snowman and admired it.

“Wow, it’s a snowman!”

“Whoaaaa, it looks AMAZING!”

“Let’s make one ourselves!”

“Hey, hey! Did you guys make this?” one of the children asked the pair.

“You bet. We just finished it a second ago!” Asahi exclaimed with vigor.

“Can I touch it? Maybe punch it too?!” another one exclaimed.

“L-Let’s be nice to Mr. Snowman, okay?” Fuyuka pleaded.

Asahi was surprised—he had imagined the children would be more wary of strangers, but these three had warmed up to him and Fuyuka in no time at all. It seemed that making such a large snowman had impressed the children, and Asahi and Fuyuka were like heroes in their eyes.

The boisterous boys informed them that they were waiting on a friend. Before long, they could hear an extra set of footsteps getting closer.

As the girl came into vision, Asahi felt a sudden pang of recognition. “Hm? Wait... Isn’t this the same kid who...?” he muttered—mostly to himself—under his breath. Asahi waved at her. The girl looked to have recognized him as well, because she quickly trotted over to him after she’d finished talking to her friends.

“You’re the ribbon guy, right?” the girl asked.

Asahi responded with a wry smile and a nod.

Fuyuka was confused by their exchange at first, but it appeared to have clicked after she’d heard the word “ribbon.” The girl also sighted the blue ribbon tied around Fuyuka’s silken black hair and heaved a sigh of relief. Fuyuka squatted down to the girl’s eye level and asked, “Were you the one who picked up my ribbon?”

Her trick must’ve worked, as the child grew visibly more relaxed. “U-Uh-huh...” she mumbled. “Sorry I took it when it wasn’t mine.”

“No need to apologize. If anything, I’m grateful that you found it,” Fuyuka assured her.

“So you’re not mad at me?”

“Of course not. It was my fault for losing it in the first place. Besides...” Fuyuka trailed off as she stood up again and gave Asahi a fond glance, “‘The ribbon guy’ was here to save the day.”

Fuyuka’s bright smile and kind words spawned a feeling of warmth within Asahi. The girl seemed to have noticed that there was something special between them, because she asked in a sing-song voice, “Are you two *dating* or something?”

“Wha?!” “Huh?!”

The dreaded question. It was so unexpected that they both looked at each other in complete shock and disarray. Their faces were beet red, and they ended up turning away in embarrassment.

“Nonono! We’re not dating or anything. You see, we’re just friends...” Asahi panicked as he turned his attention back to the young girl.

“I-I-Indeed! It’s just as he says. There’s nothing special between us...” Fuyuka frantically denied.

The children seemed to be genuinely disappointed by their response, but —fortunately for the two friends—they left their queries at that.

Asahi and Fuyuka left their snowman and exited the park.

“I suppose we look like lovers to other people,” Fuyuka remarked.

“Seems that way, yeah,” he replied. He inadvertently began to walk faster to match the pace of his pounding heart.

It had been an eventful few months—Asahi had had to endure Chiaki’s suspicions, Hinami’s distrust, Kazuaki’s assumptions, Touko’s teasing, and, finally, the children’s misunderstanding. His relationship with Fuyuka had only gained an official title just recently, and it seemed like it would be a while yet before they turned into anything more. However, none of that seemed to matter when he looked over at the beautiful girl stood next to him. One glance was all it took for him to be overly-conscious of her.

“Lovers, huh...” Asahi whispered as he came to a standstill.

Fuyuka noticed that he had stopped in his tracks and turned to face him. The radiant sunlight was growing stronger, melting the snow and ice around them. When she spoke, her breath came out in a white fog that mingled and combined with his.

“Hehe... Maybe we could be called that someday,” she let out a playful chuckle. Much like her name suggested, she was a charming and elegant flower who had finally bloomed beautifully in the winter.

Glossary

The names of the main characters, Asahi Kagami and Fuyuka Himuro, were deliberately chosen to suit the theme of *melting* the heart of an *Ice Queen*.

For example: the protagonist's last name consists of the kanji for "fire" (□, read as "ka") and "God" (□, read as "gami"). When combined, his last name means "The God of Fire." His first name, on the other hand, consists of the kanji for "morning" (□, read as "asa") and "sun" (□, read as "hi"), which combined mean "sunrise." So, in every meaning of the word, he represents the element of fire that will *melt* the Ice Queen's heart.

The name of the main heroine follows the same formula. Her last name consists of the kanji for "ice" (□, read as "hi" in this specific case) and "room" (□, read as "muro"). Her last name might appear strange at a glance, but it's easy to infer that it means "Ice Room" when the two kanji are joined together. Her first name consists of the kanji for "winter" (□, read as "fuyu") and the kanji for "flower" (□, read as "ka" in this case). When placed together, it results in "The Winter's Flower"—a name not only befitting her nickname "The Ice Queen," but also her icy personality.

In one scene in Chapter 14 (Christmas Eve), the author makes a reference to the name of the restaurant Asahi's parents manage. Soleil Levant is French for "sunrise." Of course, this coincides with Asahi's name, as it also means "sunrise" in Japanese.

It doesn't stop there, however—the author also mentions that there's only one lightsource in the restaurant in the form of a large chandelier hung in the middle of the room. This is meant to represent the rising morning sun. In other words, the entire restaurant was named and decorated around the theme of a "sunrise"—a way for Asahi's parents to celebrate their son.

In the final line of the original chapter (Playing in the Snow with "The Ice Queen"), the author references Fuyuka's first name, writing that she's standing in the snow, as beautiful as a "winter flower." This coincides with the kanji in her name, as explained above.

During the afterword, Kakeru Takamine, the author, mentions that he picked his pen name in accordance with what he wishes to achieve in the future.

“Takamine” can be divided into two kanji: the first means “high” or “lofty” (□, read as “taka”), while the second means “peak” or “top” (□, read as “mine”). When put together, his last name would mean something along the lines of “Lofty/High Peak.”

His first name, Kakeru, is actually a verb meaning “to soar” or “to fly” (□, read as “kakeru”). It makes sense that his pen name was picked specifically in order to show his lofty ambitions that reach for the sky, and that his aim is to soar among the clouds.

Afterword

Hello, it's a pleasure to meet you all. My name is Kakeru Takamine, the author of this book. This work, which was selected as one of the most popular titles in the 8th Web Novel Prize, is my debut as a writer. I chose a pen name that was in accordance with what I would like to achieve in the future—that is, something that invokes my ambition to aim for the sky and to soar through it. I'm pleased that I'm finally taking the first step toward my goal.

Now then—my request as a debut author may be obvious, but I only have one thing to ask of you: please support me and my work *How to Melt the Ice Queen's Heart*.

Throughout this book, I'll be placing an emphasis on the gradual change in Asahi and Fuyuka's relationship. They went from being mere strangers to friends in the first volume. The second volume will focus on Fuyuka's past and taking the first steps toward being more than just friends. Their story will only progress as the third and fourth volumes continue and slowly but surely close the distance between the two.

If by any chance you, the reader, feel like you would like to see the continuation of this story, please support it in any way you can. Whether it's tweeting your thoughts about it on social media, writing a review on a shopping site, recommending it to a friend, and so on. Any way of turning your support into words and posting about it would be very helpful—not just for the work, but for the creator, as well. Namely, it will secure the continuation of the series, as well as the possibility of reprinting the book with enough backing.

Also, if you'd like to tweet your thoughts about this volume, I'd be happy if you could do so by using the hashtag "#IceQueenLN." Feel free to follow me on my twitter account @kakeru_takamine while you're at it, as well.

Lastly, I would like to extend a few words of gratitude.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Takada. You helped guide me to where I am now when I had no experience whatsoever. Each of our briefings would last for a few hours at a time, though it was mostly just chatter. Thanks to you, I was able to enjoy the process of publishing a book. Thank you very much.

I would also like to thank the artist who worked on the illustrations of this book—Ichigo Kagawa. I was a fan of yours long before I'd ever written anything. Having you be the one to do the art for this book still feels like something out of a dream for me. Thank you very much.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank everyone who had a hand in the creation of this book and the readers who chose this story from all the other books on offer. I'm truly filled with gratitude. Thank you all very much.

Well then, it seems that it's time I bid you goodbye, so I will put down my pen for now. I do hope that we meet again in the next story.

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